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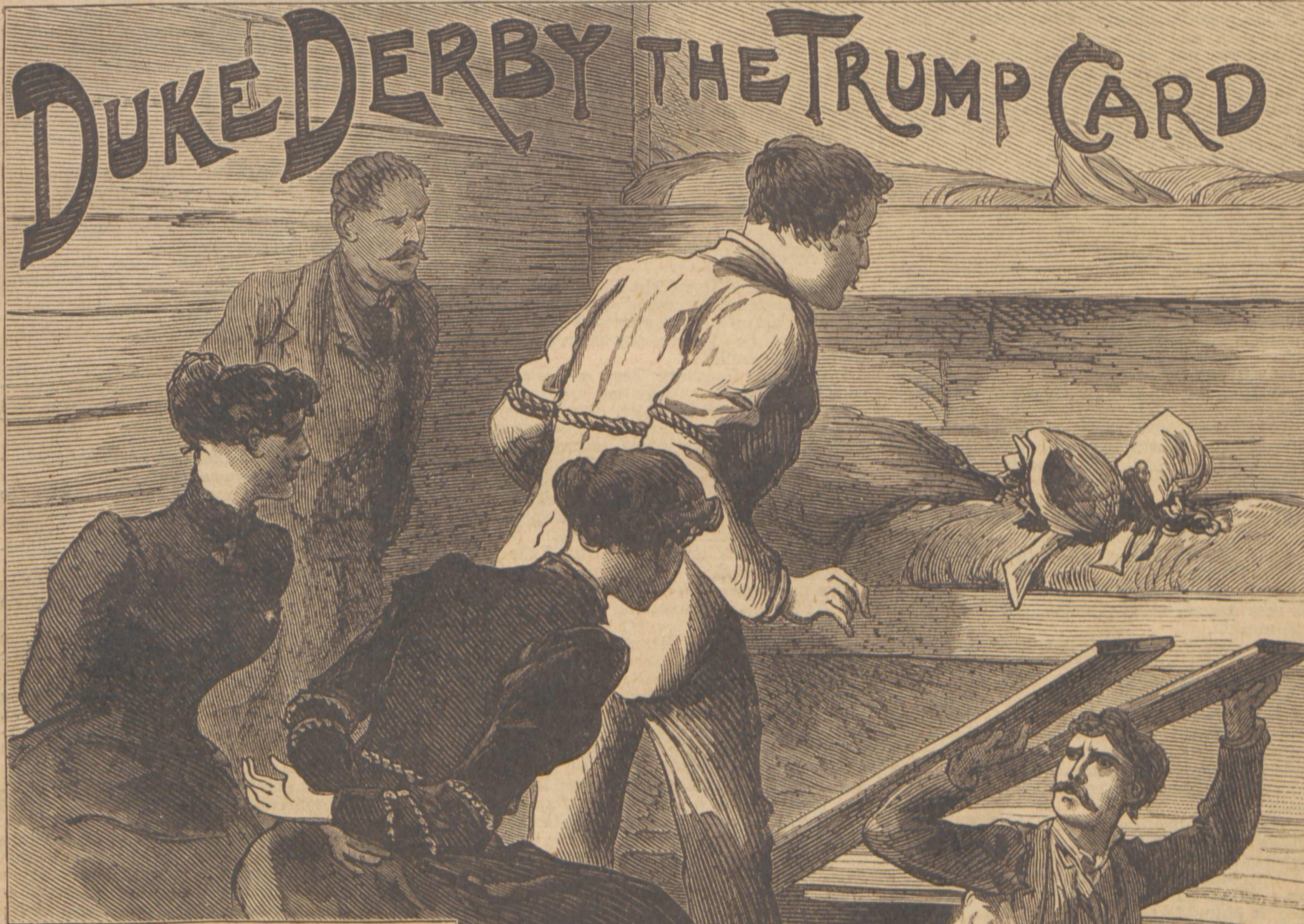
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OR,
Headlight Harry's Flyer.

The Story of the White Phenix.

BY COL. A. F. HOLT,
AUTHOR OF "HEADLIGHT HARRY" NOVELS, ETC.

CHAPTER I.

OUT OF A TRAP.

"MY God! Look, Rufe! We're in a death-trap, sure's my name is Headlight Harry!"

With these startling words, the tall, slender youth who occupied the engineer's seat in the cab of a speeding locomotive, leaped suddenly to his feet and glare wildly out upon the track.

It was an appalling situation.

Here, a long Express train drawn by Headlight Harry's pet engine, the Wildfire—a model machine, resplendent in bright paint, and high-



"SHOOT ME FOR A CAT! IT'S DUKE DERBY!" EJACULATED HEADLIGHT HARRY

ly-polished metal-work that gleamed in the rays of the blazing summer sun.

There, a long row of freight-cars, engineless, and without a human hand to control them, plunging madly down the heavy grade, straight toward the doomed Express.

As, toiling laboriously up the steep ascent, the Wildfire swept round a sharp curve, and entered the long, straight stretch beyond, the sharp-eyed engineer saw the impending danger, and realized they were face to face with death.

It was easy to explain the presence of the runaway cars, which were doubtless part of the Through Freight, that passed this point several minutes ahead of the Express, and in the same direction. This heavy grade extended for several miles, being locally known as Jacob's Ladder, and at the summit was a long side-track; here the Freight was supposed to stop, and wait for the Express to pass.

It would seem that the train had parted, ere reaching the siding, and the rear portion, consisting of about a dozen heavily-loaded cars, had eluded the trainmen, and started on an independent trip over the back track, gaining fresh speed with every passing moment.

When seen by the occupants of the cab, the "wild" train was some distance away, but approaching with frightful velocity. A terrible collision was the question of but a few moments. And such an event—seemingly inevitable—could have but one result—the complete destruction of the Express and all on board.

It was a terrible moment. Rufe Ruffle, the fireman, sat on his seat like a graven image—his eyes protruding like peeled onions, his hair fairly bristling with horror.

Not so with Headlight Harry. The brave youth took in the whole situation at a glance. He realized that to him were intrusted the lives of the scores of people, who rode at ease in the following cars, unconscious of the menacing danger. It was his duty to save them.

There was a slight chance left, but only prompt and fearless action could improve it. The awful danger only served to inspire the youth with superhuman energy; and after that one brief moment of indecision, Headlight Harry was himself again—cool, steady and reliable.

"Toot!"

Sharp and shrill, a single whistle for "brakes" rung out upon the air.

"The hand-brakes, Rufe! Quick, man!" yelled the engineer, as, with lightning-like movements, he closed the throttle and threw back the ponderous lever.

The words and actions of his fearless associate roused Rufe Ruffle from his lethargy, and he sprang to the brakes with alacrity.

Meanwhile the signal had brought the brakemen to their posts; and every one on board the train was thrown into a state of wild confusion, as they eagerly sought to learn the cause of the commotion.

On rolled the Express; but the brakes were working well, and, with the grade against it, the speed of the train steadily decreased.

It was the boy engineer's purpose to run his train back over the line, in front of the flying runaway, trusting to superior speed to escape a collision, until they reached the adverse grade existing several miles behind, which would serve to check the mad career of the strange pursuer.

Was it possible to accomplish this? Even sanguine Harry felt the chances were decidedly against them.

With appalling velocity the runaway came on. Would that it might jump the track! But no; it clung tenaciously to the iron trail, as though fully bent on annihilating everything in its path.

Meantime, the Express was rapidly coming to a standstill. Standing firmly at his post, Headlight Harry carefully calculated the fast-decreasing distance. The runaway was close upon them now; but the heart of the young engineer beat hopefully, as the huge wheels of the Wildfire ceased to revolve, and the train stood motionless upon the rails.

"Toot!—toot!"—off brakes!

Swiftly the lever was reversed—the throttle opened wide! Like lightning the great wheels spun round upon the slippery steel.

"Sand, Rufe!" yelled Headlight Harry, and the fireman sprung to obey.

The Wildfire, snorting and groaning, shot backward like a rocket. Not a second too soon! With a crash, the foremost car overtook and struck the locomotive, which fortunately was reversed in time to escape the full force of the shock. Even then, the cow-catcher was crushed and torn away, while the whole machine trembled at the blow; but the Wildfire gallantly kept

the track, and then began a thrilling race for life.

Panting, throbbing, lurching violently from side to side, the engine plunged madly down the dizzy decline, threatening each moment to overturn. The velocity was frightful; but, by a miracle, the train kept the rails.

One hand upon the throttle, Headlight Harry, cool and confident, keenly watched the pursuing cars, from which, now, only a few feet separated them.

"It is nip and tuck, but we manage to hold our own," he exclaimed. "Our safety is assured—unless we jump the iron!"

Rufe Ruffle, clinging desperately to the side of the cab, forgot his own terror to admire the nonchalance of his young companion.

"Shoot me for a pole-cat! For unadulterated coolness you win first money. An iceberg has no earthly show with you," he managed to ejaculate.

On sped the racers! The steep decline was ended and the Express flashed upon the level grade beyond, closely pursued by the runaway. Hitherto, so great was the velocity acquired by the latter, that it easily held its own with the locomotive; but now the situation changed. On the level, the pursuer, with decreased impetus, soon began to lose ground. Steadily the gap widened.

"Safe at last!" cried Rufe Ruffle, exultantly. "Now nothing remains for us but to keep on, until them cars git tired an' stop of their own free will."

But Headlight Harry gave a sudden cry of dismay.

"The Special!" he exclaimed. "I had forgotten we are followed by an Extra! In fleeing from one danger we are only rushing upon another equally as terrible."

Again Rufe Ruffle's face assumed an ashy hue.

"What's to be done?" he breathlessly demanded.

For a moment Headlight Harry was distressingly disconcerted. The Special train which followed a few minutes behind the Express, must now be dangerously near. A collision seemed inevitable.

The young engineer cast a hasty glance ahead. He saw they were fast approaching an immense ridge, from which the company obtained their supply of gravel. Along this bank a short, open side-track was constructed.

Fruitful in expedients, Headlight Harry determined to throw the runaway train upon this siding! Quickly he shut off steam. The Freight cars were scarcely a hundred feet away, and yet running rapidly.

"Take care of the engine, Rufe," the young man commanded.

The next instant he stood upon the step of the cab. Between his teeth he gripped a switch-key.

As the train flashed past the switch, Headlight Harry swung lightly to the ground. With catlike agility he alighted upon his feet. In a twinkling he was at the switch.

Rarely used, the switch was rusty and swollen, and obstinately refused to operate. But desperation endowed the resolute engineer with superhuman strength. Like a madman he strained and tugged at the resisting lever, which slowly yielded, inch by inch, and then—

The runaway shot upon the spot like a meteor! Delighted, Headlight Harry saw the wheels spin upon the rails of the side-track! The Express train was saved!

The Freight cars quickly reached the end of the siding, and plunged down the precipitous bank, piling upon one another, a total wreck, their wild career checked at last!

Replacing the switch, Headlight Harry ran quickly to his engine which Rufe Ruffle, in the mean time had brought to a sudden stop. Modestly receiving the flood of thanks and praise pouring from the lips of those whom his indomitable pluck and coolness had saved from death, the intrepid engineer climbed to his seat and the delayed Express once more moved on its way.

CHAPTER II.

THE KIDNAPPER.

NEAR the outskirts of Richville, on an elevated site commanding an excellent view of that thriving Western community, stood the stately residence of Gilbert Garland, the wealthy railroad magnate; a masterpiece of architectural beauty, surrounded by spacious grounds, with smooth lawns and shaded walks and driveways.

One balmy night in early June, the splendid home of the Garlands was pervaded with an air

of unusual stir and activity. The mansion was wreathed from roof to basement with gay bunting, intermingled with countless festoons of flowers and evergreens, while flags and streamers flaunted gayly from every available position. Lights gleamed hospitably from every window, while the building and adjacent grounds were hung with myriads of colored lanterns. Crowds of people, hurrying to and fro, lent life and animation to the pleasing scene.

The Garlands were in gala attire; and really there was cause for mirth and gladness, for it was not the wedding anniversary of their only daughter Grace and Ralph Renwood, the popular young superintendent of the R. & S. R. R.?

Nearly two years had passed since the series of stirring adventures, in which Grace Garland and Renwood, then an engineer, figured so prominently, and which ended in the overthrow and destruction of the Black Brotherhood, including the leader, Black Bart, and Dave Darke, his crafty subaltern.

Ralph's heroism had served to establish him firmly in the good graces of the magnate, and the result was rapid promotion, until he now held the superintendency of the Western Division.

It was exactly a year since the dashing young fellow led fair Grace Garland to the altar; and the parents of the bride, wishing to celebrate the anniversary in a fitting manner, caused a grand ball and reception to be held at the mansion, to which the public was cordially invited.

Needless to say the invitation was not ignored. Legions of friends flocked to the scene of festivity, and filled the grand mansion to overflowing.

The young couple—he tall, handsome and manly, she slight, graceful, and radiantly beautiful, were, of course, the subjects of universal attention, and modestly received the congratulations of their many friends.

Millionaire Garland was here, there and everywhere, with sprightly step and rubicund countenance, bearing the weight of his sixty years with an air of sublime contentment, that only a happy combination of health and wealth could produce.

As the evening advanced, the spacious parlors were cleared for dancing, and amid the merry mazes of the waltz, dull care was left behind, and unalloyed enjoyment filled every breast.

But the Fates had planned an untimely termination to the merrymaking.

When the festivity was at its height, a terrible cry was suddenly heard:

"Fire!—fire!"

The next instant, a servant dashed breathlessly in.

"Fire!—fire! The stables are all ablaze! For Heaven's sake, gentlemen, make haste, or we shall all be burned alive!" spluttered the terror-stricken menial, who, making a dash for the open air, stumbled and fell sprawling upon the floor in an ungracious heap.

This dread announcement had a demoralizing effect upon the merrymakers. Ladies screamed, some fainted, while the gentlemen made a general rush out upon the lawn, only to find that the servant's words were true.

The elegant stables, and other out-buildings, were built of wood and located about a hundred feet to the rear of the mansion. When the party reached the lawn, both ends of the long stable were ablaze, showing without doubt that the fire was of incendiary origin. Fanned by a strong breeze, the flames leaped furiously over the dry timbers, threatening the entire building with destruction.

Immediately the men united in a gallant effort to save the stable, or at least its contents, among which were a number of blooded horses highly prized by their owner.

Knights of the ball-room quickly became amateur firemen, who made up in zeal what they lacked in experience. Richville was without the services of a fire department; but a quantity of buckets and ladders were obtained, and then commenced a fierce battle with the flames.

Working like beavers, little thought they that the sensation of the night was yet to follow—that the incendiary fire was but a cunning ruse, designed to pave the way for the accomplishment of a still more dastardly outrage!

Suddenly upon the ears of the fire-fighters was wafted a chorus of shrill shrieks and piteous cries for help. They came from the interior of the mansion, where the ladies had gathered at the windows to witness the conflagration.

All eyes were turned in that direction, just as the tall, uncouth figure of a man appeared in

doorway, bearing in his arms Grace Renwood, the beauteous hostess of the evening!

Pausing for an instant, the marauder coolly surveyed the scene; then strode deliberately across the lawn to where a powerful horse impatiently awaited his coming. Swinging into the saddle, the audacious stranger put spurs to his steed, and, uttering a derisive yell, sped swiftly along the avenue leading to the highway, bearing in his arms Ralph Renwood's bride!

The movements of the bold abductor, made perfectly visible by the brilliant illumination, were so cool and deliberate that the spectators could only gaze in blank astonishment, until the sound of rapidly-receding hoofs recalled them to their senses.

Then, for a time, the burning stable was forgotten, as an excited throng of citizens surged forward, wild with indignation, eager to pursue and punish the bold perpetrator of this midnight outrage.

Within the mansion all was confusion. From the terrified ladies it was learned that the mysterious unknown had suddenly invaded their midst, seized Grace in his arms and swiftly retreated, at the same time hurling some object across the room.

Investigation proved this object to be a heavy bowie, still quivering in the oaken paneling, deeply driven by a dexterous hand. Pinned to the wall by the glittering blade a sheet of paper fluttered inscribed with blood-red characters.

"To RALPH RENWOOD, greeting:

"Long have you dwelt in peace, but this night your dream of bliss shall have a rude awakening! Beware! for Mad River has given up its dead! The time for revenge is at hand! Tremble, wretch, for swift and certain is the vengeance of

"THE WHITE PHENIX."

Such was the ominous message that attracted the attention of the people and filled them with awe and mystification.

Meantime, while many were staring at the threatening placard on the wall, the more self-possessed of the number were making active preparations for the chase. Pursuit on foot was worse than useless, so a general rush was made to procure horses.

Ralph Renwood was first to secure a mount. As he rushed distractedly about, half-crazed by the terrible calamity, a villager, attracted by the fire, dashed up on horseback. To explain matter took but a moment, and in a twinkling the steed had changed riders and was being spurred rapidly over the road taken by the mysterious marauder.

The latter had chosen his course wisely, taking the road that led out into the open country, where he was free from molestation. It was only by superior speed that the pursuer could hope to overtake him.

Madly through the darkness rode Ralph Renwood. Words cannot depict the conflicting emotions that raged uncontrolled within his breast. The knowledge that the woman he cherished was helpless in the power of an unknown foe served to kindle his fiercest passions, and transformed him into a veritable madman.

Bending over his horse's neck, with blazing eyes fixed steadfastly upon the trail, the young man urged on the flagging animal, while the pale moonlight revealed a face pale as death, set, stern and resolute.

Not an inch did he turn to right or left. Better for him had he looked behind, for now a new actor suddenly appeared upon the scene.

Far in the rear a number of Ralph's friends came straggling in pursuit as fast as they could secure mounts; but in advance of these rode another horseman, who drew away from the others with marvelous ease.

A short, squat, ungainly figure, whose head scarcely reached the level of that of his steed, sat like a statue in the saddle. The horse's hoofs were muffled and awoke no echo as on he flew with the speed of the wind.

Like a shadow flitted the wonderful steed with its mysterious rider, swiftly lessening the distance that separated them from Ralph Renwood, who still pressed madly on, unconscious that peril lurked behind.

Nearer—nearer, until the head of the pursuing horse had crept up even with the young superintendent's saddle. Then the latter turned, dismayed, but too late to avoid the consequences.

The gaunt form of the mysterious horseman stretched eagerly forward and his uplifted arm descended with terrible force upon the young man's head.

Without a cry Ralph Renwood fell back to be grasped in the sinewy arms of his murderous assailant!

CHAPTER III. THE DEAD ALIVE.

WHEN the hapless young superintendent recovered consciousness, it was to find himself lying within a small apartment, whose only furniture was a rickety stool and the rude couch of skins upon which he reclined.

The walls were thickly hung with the skins of bears and other animals, while the floor was covered by the same material. The roof was constructed of poles, covered by broad strips of bark, and topped with heavy boughs, the whole forming a perfectly storm-proof canopy. No entrance was visible, but small orifices in the walls admitted light and air.

Only this could Renwood see, for on attempting to rise, he found himself securely bound; so he could only conjecture as to what was on the outside of his prison.

Ralph's brain still reeled from the effects of the terrible blow he received, while the tight cords cut into his aching flesh; but bodily pain was naught compared with the mental anguish he endured, when the memory of the night just past returned to his confused mind.

Anxious to learn the fate of his beloved wife, not to mention his own painful predicament, the young man chafed within his narrow prison. The solitude was irritating, and he waited impatiently for some one to appear.

Presently a portion of the skin-clad wall was pulled aside, and in the opening appeared a figure, at sight of which the prisoner gave an exclamation of wonder, not unmixed with dismay.

The form was that of a negro, black as the proverbial ace of spades, and a more hideous creature it is difficult to imagine. He was scarcely five feet in height, with broad chest and shoulders, upon which rested a repulsive head, bullet-shaped with flaming eyes and cavernous mouth which, opened, displayed a set of sharp, gleaming fangs. His back bore the burden of an enormous hump. The legs of this human monstrosity were frightfully bowed. His arms were remarkably long, with huge hands that terminated in fingers long and bony like the claws of an eagle.

Not satisfied with the manifold afflictions bestowed by Nature, the hideous being had pierced his nose and ears for huge rings, cannibal fashion, and also smeared his face with gaudy paints, all of which went to heighten the grotesqueness of his appearance.

The creature's attire was simple, consisting of a scarlet shirt, and tattered breeches, the latter being tucked into dilapidated boots, and held in place by a broad belt fairly bristling with weapons.

Such, in detail, is a description of the nondescript being who appeared before Ralph Renwood. For a moment he gloatingly contemplated the prisoner, his ugly face distorted by a diabolical grin, then, without a word, withdrew as abruptly as he entered.

The young superintendent drew a long breath of relief, when the curtains closed between him and the frightful apparition. He was convinced that his recent assailant and captor was identical with the hunchback; but certain it was, he was not the abductor of Grace. The negro must have at least one accomplice.

Yes. A moment later the curtains were again drawn aside. A man confronted the prisoner.

Ralph's eyes opened wide in surprise. Was he awake or dreaming? Was this a museum of human monstrosities, into which he was spirited?

The new-comer was by no means so repulsive as the first visitor, yet his appearance was none the less wonderful. He was a tall and muscular fellow, roughly clad and armed to the teeth. What rendered him an object of wonder was the fact that his face, neck, hands—all visible portions of his skin, were of a peculiar, snowy whiteness! Even the hair and beard were bleached, by some mysterious agency, to the same immaculate hue! His face was seamed with many scars, of all shapes and sizes, which showed with startling vividness upon the snowy skin.

This extraordinary disfigurement gave its possessor an aspect strange and unearthly. He advanced into the room, fixing upon the pinned captive eyes that glowed like balls of living fire.

"My black friend told me you had recovered your senses," he exclaimed, in a cold, stern voice. "It is well; for I have something important to say to you. Ha!"

At the sound of the phenomenon's voice, Ralph Renwood had given a violent start of recognition. The speaker observed it.

"You know me, then, Ralph Renwood?" he interrogated.

The young man eagerly scrutinized the ghostly features of his visitor. Of a surety he had heard that voice before. A peculiar tone it was, and the only person he ever heard use its like was his old foe and rival, the lieutenant of the Black Brotherhood—

"Dave Darke!"

The words fell wonderingly from Renwood's lips.

He of the spectral face laughed sardonically.

"Your memory serves you well. I hardly expected you would recognize me, such a change has taken place. Very good! It saves me the trouble of introducing myself."

Hardly able to credit his senses, Ralph Renwood glared at the speaker in mute amazement. Dave Darke in the flesh? Impossible!

With vivid distinctness he recalled the fatal morning that witnessed the destruction of the Black Brotherhood. With his own eyes he had seen the outlaw-freighted locomotive take its terrible plunge; had seen the forms of Darke and his chief, as, locked in a close embrace, they were whirled swiftly away upon the bosom of Mad River. Even if not killed outright by the fall, nothing short of a miracle could save him from death upon the jagged rocks that strewed the stream.

Yet the voice was the same—yes, the features were familiar! Restore to the snowy skin its natural complexion, give to the hair its original color, and there was Dave Darke, grim and un-mistakable!

With folded arms and twinkling eyes, the visitor gazed steadfastly at the prisoner, hugely enjoying the latter's bewilderment.

"I see you are nonplussed at sight of me. Well, that is not to be wondered at. But listen, while I offer a brief explanation, which may relieve your perplexity. First, however, I have something to show you!"

The man who claimed to be Dave Darke advanced to the end of the apartment opposite that through which he had entered. Drawing aside the bear-skin curtains, he revealed another room similar to the first. It contained an occupant—a lady, who, bound hand and foot, reclined upon a couch.

It was Grace Renwood, clad in her elegant ball-dress. Her luxuriant hair was tossed in wild confusion; her face wore traces of severe mental anguish.

The eyes of husband and wife met in painful recognition.

"Oh, Ralph, my husband, save me!" shrieked Grace.

At sight of his helpless bride, the young man's fury was rekindled. With desperate energy he sought to free himself, but the cords defied his mightiest efforts. His arch-enemy watched him derisively.

"Calm yourself, my dear Renwood," he advised, coolly. "It's quite useless to work yourself into such a state of frenzy. Pray be attentive, while I my marvelous tale unfold."

He drew up the stool, and seated himself in a position where both prisoners might hear.

"Of course," he began, "you well remember the catastrophe that brought the Black Brotherhood to an untimely end. When the engine plunged down to destruction, I, in common with my associates, was too terrified to move a finger. Down—down we went, striking the water with a mighty crash. A flying object struck me upon the head, and I knew no more.

"When I regained my senses, it was to find myself lying in this very cabin. I looked about for my deliverer. He soon appeared, in the shape of the horrible being whom you have just seen. To my weak and clouded imagination, he seemed a very fiend from Hades. In my fury, I sprung up to grapple with the demon; but the effort was too great, and I again fell back unconscious.

"For long, weary weeks and months I lay in a semi-conscious state. Now lying for days like one dead; anon, raving and cursing like a madman. All memory of the past was lost to me. My grotesque companion cared for me as well as his limited knowledge would permit. At last I began to improve, very slowly at first, but steadily. One by one, past events came back to me. My body regained its natural powers; and at length I arose, as well and strong as ever, but how changed!

"During my illness, every particle of my skin, together with my hair, turned from their natural color to the ghastly hue you now see. The cause of this phenomenon is beyond my feeble powers of penetration. Enough that I am a marked man. But what matters a little

disfigurement, when revenge is within one's grasp?

"Well, no sooner had I regained my faculties, than I began to consider the situation. I found myself upon a small wooded island in the middle of a vast swamp. The negro, whom you have seen, is a wild, ferocious creature, with a heart black as his skin. Forced to flee from civilization for some crime or other, he has existed here for years, his only companion a huge bloodhound even fiercer than his master. I consider it a miracle that he possessed humanity enough to pull me from the river and nurse me back to life. But my strange and supernatural appearance has inspired his superstitious soul with fear and reverence. Henceforth I am his master. I have dubbed him the Swamp Demon, and the name suits him well."

"Immediately I arranged my future plans. It had been my ambition to command the Black Brotherhood, but that grand organization is wept out of existence. I determined to organize a new brotherhood, that would rise from the ruins of the old, like the famous bird of fable—a veritable Phenix, to spread destruction and terrorize the community! Dave Darke is on more; but from his grave has arisen a demon, whose only object is plunder and revenge. The world shall tremble at the name of the *White Phenix*!"

The man had delivered his lengthy speech rapidly and vehemently, and now arose from his seat, his eyes blazing with an insane light.

"This swamp-island shall be our stronghold. Wild and impenetrable, never visited by man, who could conceive a better place? Already is formed the nucleus of an organization, that, within a month, shall become the scourge of the community. But enough of the future. Let me speak of the present, which more particularly concerns you and yours.

"I had not forgotten you, Ralph Renwood, nor the lovely Grace, whom I long since swore to possess. My first thought was of revenge! Patiently I waited for a favorable opportunity to strike. It came—the night of your wedding anniversary! Could I choose a more fitting time? Carefully my plans were laid. While I lurked in front of the mansion, my faithful Demon crept to the rear and ignited the stable. The result was exactly what I anticipated.

"In wild confusion you all rushed to extinguish the flames, while I came and boldly stole away your bride. I had not planned to capture you; but chance led my baboon friend to your side, and knowing my intense hatred for you, he kindly knocked you over and brought you to me. I hardly expected such good fortune.

"I suppose you are anxious to learn your fate. Well, Grace, after a lapse of years, shall at last become my bride. Here, on this dismal island, far from home and friends, she shall reign as the queen of the *White Phenix*!"

"As for you, Ralph Renwood, the enmity which has long existed between us can only be expiated by death! Prepare to meet your doom!"

With these ominous words, he who had called himself the *White Phenix* turned abruptly and vanished from the cabin, leaving the hapless prisoners to their own reflections.

CHAPTER IV.

THE FLAGMAN'S DAUGHTER.

NEAR the railroad track, not far distant from the Richville Station, stood a modest cottage. It was the home of Seth Sharon, an honest, industrious fellow, for many years a trusty employee in the service of the company.

Some time before, Sharon had injured his limb in an unfortunate accident, and after many long weeks of confinement, arose to find himself a cripple for life.

However, his faithful services were not forgotten by a grateful company, for they set aside a piece of land near the village, and built thereon a comfortable cottage for the use of the veteran and his kin.

Incapacitated from his former duties, Sharon still found employment as flagman at the busy crossing near the dépôt, and in his cosey home lived a life of peace and contentment.

His wife being long since dead, Seth's only companion was his daughter, Ruth, upon whom devolved the duties of the household.

Ruth Sharon was a lovely girl, barely eighteen, just budding into the full bloom of womanhood; a very picture of beauty, slight, supple and graceful, with long, dark hair and sparkling eyes, and cheeks glowing with the rosy tint of health.

Reared in a higher sphere, this modest maid would have become a belle among belles; but Ruth was contented with her lot. It pleased her, day by day, to contribute in every possible way to the comfort and happiness of her father, whom she dearly loved. Happy in his society, she cared for no other—

Unless it was that of the dashing youth who flashed by daily, perched in the locomotive of the fast Express. Headlight Harry, as they thundered past, always looked for a smiling face in the window of Seth Sharon's cottage.

Late one afternoon Ruth sat by her favorite window. Bewitching she looked in a pretty dress of calico, as she placidly contemplated the result of her long day's labor.

Everything in the house was scrupulously neat and clean. The floor was polished until it shone. Every article had its allotted place. The sides of the cottage were adorned by skillfully trained vines and redolent flowers, and from the window she could look out upon a luxuriant garden, already bringing forth the fruits of her own careful labor.

"Half-past five! I must prepare father's supper," exclaimed the girl, as she glanced at the quaint, old-fashioned clock.

Before she could rise, however, a shadow crossed the threshold, followed by the figure of a man.

Ruth gave a low cry of dismay, as she recognized her visitor.

He was a tall, muscular young fellow of twenty-five, with a face that, once handsome, now wore traces of dissipation. His keen black eyes burned brightly, and from his manner it was evident he had been drinking.

"Good-afternoon, Ruth! Happy to find you alone. Jove! you are looking pretty as a picture," complimented the rake, as he advanced familiarly into the room.

Instantly Ruth Sharon was upon her feet, rosy with indignation, one finger pointed threateningly at the intruder.

"Stop, Duke Derby!" she exclaimed. "How dare you come here, when I told you never again to cross this threshold? Your impudence is sublime, sir."

"To be told so by such fair lips as thine is certainly an honor," returned the visitor, with a suave smile. "Be not angry with me, fair Ruth. Happening in this locality, I saw fit to call, thinking perchance you have concluded to alter your decision. Doubtless you recollect the subject to which I refer."

"Yes; I remember perfectly well how, with amazing audacity, you asked me to be your wife. My answer was, and is, decidedly, 'No!'"

"So you still remain obdurate. I see where the shoe pinches. You prefer that young whelp, Headlight Harry, infernal beggar! Bah!"

"Coward! While Harry Hilton is a mere youth, who toils for his daily bread, yet he has the qualities of a gentleman, which you, with your fine clothes and boasted position, fail to possess. What are you? Idler, drunkard, gambler—Heaven knows what else!"

Duke Derby's face flushed with anger at these spirited words.

"Have a care!" he hissed. "Beware how you anger me, for I am a devil when aroused. Once more, Ruth Sharon, I ask you to become my wife. You will fare hard, if you refuse. What say you?"

"No! Come what will, my answer is still the same. Loathsome wretch, I detest and defy you! Begone, scoundrel, lest my father return and kick you from the house!"

Duke Derby laughed amusedly.

"I will save the dear old man the trouble," he said; "but, before I go, one kiss from those warm, ripe lips!"

Gloatingly the fellow advanced, to receive a welcome he had not anticipated.

As she quickly retreated, Ruth Sharon snatched a broom from its accustomed place, and aimed a desperate blow at her insulter. There was no little strength and energy in those plump arms, and the novel weapon, swung round at arm's-length, caught Duke Derby under the chin with a resounding thwack!

Lifted fairly from his feet, the ruffian fell sprawling upon the floor, from which he arose, looking decidedly crestfallen.

Duke Derby was furious; but experience had taught him that the maiden was fully capable of defending herself, and he wisely desisted from a second attempt.

"Minx!—spitfire!—vixen!" he hissed, terribly enraged. "I'll find a way to tame your spirit. Beware, proud beauty, for we shall meet again!"

With these threatening words, Duke Derby withdrew, leaving plucky Ruth Sharon mistress of the situation.

Leaving the cottage, the discomfited scoundrel slowly made his way in the direction of the town, his brain busy with evil schemes.

The warm reception with which he had met, surprised and disconcerted him; and it was not until he had reached the nearest saloon, and poured several glasses of liquor down his capacious throat, that he felt himself again.

Leaving the bar, the sport passed into a rear apartment, devoted to gambling, the room containing several tables, most of which were now occupied.

Advancing, Derby leaned over the shoulder of one of the players, a dissipated young fellow, and whispered softly:

"I've got the scheme fixed, Dan. Meet me at eight, at the appointed place, and pass the word to Dick."

The other nodded, while Derby passed carelessly on, seating himself at a vacant table. He was a proficient gambler, and was soon immersed in the intricacies of "stud-horse poker."

Luck was against the sport, for he lost with a regularity that was exasperating. Steadily his pile decreased, until finally he staked his last dollar—and lost!

With an oath, Duke Derby arose and quit the room.

"Trust me for a drink, Alex?" he queried of the barkeeper. "I'm cleaned out—haven't a nickel left."

The beer-dispenser grinned assent, and the gambler, after tossing off his glass, coolly sauntered out into the night.

He took a roundabout course that led gradually from the town, and eight o'clock found him in a retired spot fully half a mile from habitations.

The others were already there.

"Hello, boys!" Derby saluted. "Glad to see you here on time."

"Any luck?" inquired one of the fellows, in response.

"Bad luck, yes! Clean busted again. How is it with you?"

"Dead broke, as usual," groaned Dan.

"And you, Dick?"

"Haven't the price of a drink left."

"Things are looking decidedly blue for us," declared Duke. "Something must be done to raise the wind. I have been thinking it over to-day, and have conjured up a plan which, properly executed, ought to produce the requisite wealth."

Derby's companions leaned eagerly forward to hear.

"As our usual luck at cards has deserted us," continued the sport, "I propose that we try our hand at train-robbing. Ha! The idea startles you, eh? Well, if you are afraid—"

"It ain't so," interrupted Dick, promptly. "No one can accuse us of cowardice, if there's boddle concerned."

"Good! Well, my plan is to attack the Express that arrives here in the evening. This train carries a heavy mail and, generally, many valuable Express packages. I mean to derail the engine, then, when the confusion is at its height, secure the spoils and decamp. I am aware this is a daring scheme, but if successful, we reap a golden harvest. What do you say, pards?"

"We're with you, Duke, through thick and thin. The prospect is too dazzling for us to turn our backs. When is the job to be done?"

"To-morrow night. Meet me here at dark. Bring spades, picks and crowbars, and see that not a soul observes you. In the mean time I will arrange the details. Understand?"

"Ay, pard. We'll be on hand, never fear."

"Then, good-night!"

The trio of worthies separated, returning to town by different routes, ignorant of the fact that sharp ears had overheard every word.

As the arch-plotter hastened along, wrapped in his own evil thoughts, a hand was laid heavily upon his shoulder, and a stern voice rung in his startled ears.

"Stop! A word with you, Duke Derby!"

The gambler wheeled to find himself confronted by a personage whose face gleamed ghastly white in the mellow moonlight. He eyed the stranger with surprise.

"Who the blazes are you?" he demanded.

"Not so much of a stranger as you think, Derby. What my name is doesn't matter. I call myself the *White Phenix*!"

"White Fiddlesticks! I don't know you, fellow. What do you want?" demanded the sport, impatiently.

"Simply to tell you that your late conversa-

tion was overheard. Quite a creditable plot, to be sure."

"Blazes! You were listening?"

"Exactly!"

The gambler made a sudden movement, then stopped abruptly, for he found himself looking into the glistening barrel of a six-shooter."

"Be careful!" warned the stranger. "I'm up to snuff, young man."

Derby saw that he was covered.

"Well, have your own way," he said, with apparent unconcern. "If I may ask, what is your little game?"

"I simply want to take a hand in this racket, with, of course, a share of the plunder. An equal division would suit me."

"And supposing such a partnership is distasteful to me?"

"Then I shall at once lodge information against you with the town authorities. By daybreak, this vicinity will be too hot to hold you."

"Listen, Duke Derby!" went on the Phenix. "I come to you, not as a foe, but as a friend and comrade. I am an outlaw, with a price upon my head. People believe me dead, but I still live, and propose to rear an organization that shall make our names a terror all along the line. I know you, Derby, to be a man of my own stamp—cool, brave and reliable. Such as you I need to complete my band. I will make you my lieutenant. Think of the wealth that passes daily to and fro! A few months of skillful work will make us all rich men. What do you say to the arrangement?"

Duke Derby had listened attentively. The tempting words of the Phenix impressed him favorably. Though at first resenting the interruption of his plans, yet he reasoned it were folly to refuse the proffered assistance. If successful, the haul would doubtless be a large one, and he could easily afford a division of the spoils. Besides, the gambler shrewdly foresaw the value of the Phenix's assistance in his designs against Ruth Sharon.

After due deliberation he decided to accept the proposition, and said as much in a few words.

"Very good!" exclaimed the White Phenix. "I hope you will never regret it. I shall deal squarely with you, and expect you to do the same. Now, I heard you instruct your friends to meet you here at dark to-morrow. I, too, will be here, ready for business. To-morrow night shall witness the first work of the White Phenix! Until then, good-by!"

The white-faced outlaw then turned and disappeared as silently as he came!

CHAPTER V.

RUTH TO THE RESCUE.

RUTH SHARON stood in the door of her father's vine-clad cottage, as the clock upon the kitchen shelf chimed out the hour of six.

It was the afternoon following that which brought the unwelcome visit of Duke Derby. Ruth had seen nothing of the gambler that day; but his menacing words still rung in her ears. Knowing the character of the man, she felt that he would hesitate at nothing to accomplish his purpose.

It was time for her father to come home. On the table a smoking hot supper was spread, prepared by her loving hands. Eagerly Ruth watched the narrow lane, down which the familiar form of Seth Sharon was wont to come.

But the usual time failed to bring the old flagman. He was late; and as the moments flew by, the maiden grew alarmed, for his absence was something unusual.

Darkness fell; but still Sharon failed to appear. Perhaps he was detained by some extra duty! Ruth tried to console herself with this thought; but, strive as she might, she could not throw off the growing premonition of evil.

The girl was unable to longer endure the suspense. Filled with a sudden determination to find her father, and without stopping for hat or shawl, she rushed out into the night.

Seth Sharon was not at his post, for all the day trains had passed. Anxious inquiries from various persons whom she met elicited no information concerning him. No one had seen the flagman that night.

Ruth was overwhelmed with fear and anxiety. But, stay! A sudden thought occurred to her.

It was the custom to inspect the road, at nightfall, after all day trains had passed, to insure a safe track for the passage of the night trains, of which there were several. Men were appointed to go over the line for specified distances, mounted on hand-cars, keeping a care-

ful lookout for the broken rails, washouts, or other possible obstructions. Each station had its section, running a certain distance, and connecting with the adjoining divisions. In this manner every rod of the road was carefully examined nightly.

This process was technically known as "track-walking," and it was part of Seth Sharon's duty to "walk" the Richville section.

Ruth saw a possible solution to the mystery surrounding her parent's absence. Doubtless, being detained at the crossing, he had hurried to go over his allotted beat before coming home—though this he had never done before.

Hope struggling with fear and doubt, the girl hastened to the car-house. There was the well-known hand-car in its usual place. The flagman had not been there!

Poor Ruth! At that moment her beloved father, bound and gagged, was lying, bruised and senseless, in an adjacent field!

The flagman's daughter felt the premonition of coming evil. Something was wrong on the railroad! She knew the next train was the evening Express, and the driver was her friend and lover, Headlight Harry. What if he were in danger?

The thought inspired the girl with courage. Seth Sharon had failed to perform his duty; but she, with indomitable pluck, determined to "walk" the track herself!

Quickly she set to work to place the heavy car upon the track. It was a task that taxed her womanly strength, but it was finally accomplished. No one was near to observe her movements.

To adjust the belt and light the red lantern took but a minute, and Ruth Sharon was ready for her wild night ride.

It was the custom of the flagman to go over the eastern end first; but a subtle power guided the movements of the girl, who turned the car westward to meet Headlight Harry and the incoming Express.

Taking her place at the crank, the brave maid moved away, slowly at first, but with steadily increasing speed. The lights of the village were quickly left behind.

With amazing energy, Ruth propelled the car over the rails, while the light of the lantern danced fantastically upon the track as they flew ahead. Often had she accompanied her father upon his rounds, cheerfully tugging at the crank, charmed by the merry music of the humming wheels; and now the training served her in good stead.

For three miles the car sped on without interruption. The region was a lonely one; dense, gloomy woods skirted the track on either hand. At this point the road penetrated a lofty ridge, through which a deep cut had been made, locally known as the Devil's Ditch. On either side of this narrow gorge, steep walls of rock and earth rose to the height of a hundred feet.

As Ruth Sharon drew near this dismal spot, she saw a sight that thrilled her soul with horror.

The full moon was rising above the crest of the ridge, and the girl beheld a group of shadowy forms standing upon the edge of the cliff, in bold relief against the lighted sky.

There were five of them, fantastic figures in silhouette, whose movements were plainly revealed by the moonlight. Industriously they labored to dislodge a huge boulder, several tons in weight, which rested upon the very brink of the precipice.

All this Ruth Sharon saw at a glance. The truth was obvious. The men on the height, striving to hurl this ponderous mass of rock down upon the track, could have but one object—the destruction of the Evening Express, which would soon be due.

The brave girl was determined to save it. To do this she must pass through the Devil's Ditch, and already the huge rock quivered, seemingly about to fall.

Desperation lent her almost superhuman strength, and the hand-car scarcely seemed to touch the rails, as on it flew toward the fatal spot.

A loud shout from above told that she was discovered. The whir of wheels had reached the vigilant ears of the marauders, and, as if divining the girl's purpose, they worked desperately to dislodge the boulder.

Like a meteor the car flashed between the echoing walls, just as the mighty mass, pried from its foundation, rolled rapidly down the hillside, followed by a stream of earth and stones.

With a mighty crash, it fell squarely across the track, forming an insurmountable barrier.

But Ruth Sharon was safe. By a hair's-breadth, she had escaped the falling boulder, and now her red light flashed defiance, as she sped on her mission of rescue.

Yells of rage came from the baffled wreckers, followed by a volley of pistol-shots. Bullets flew thick and fast. One actually grazed her cheek; another shattered the lantern and extinguished its light.

The brave girl never flinched from the storm of lead. With compressed lips and flashing eyes, her hair, unconfined, flying wildly to the breeze, Ruth Sharon stood resolutely at her post, while the vehicle bore her rapidly out of danger.

A few moments later, she heard the long, low whistle of a distant locomotive. It was the Express, less than a mile away.

Ruth's heart gave a joyful bound, only to be followed by a feeling of consternation.

Her lantern was broken and useless. How could she signal the train and save it from destruction?

The moon was now obscured by a threatening bank of clouds, that portended an approaching storm. Utter darkness reigned. The engineer could not see her until too late.

The train was rapidly approaching. Not a moment to lose. Must all her efforts be in vain?

No! Woman's wit devised a way out of the difficulty.

Leaving the car to proceed slowly by its own momentum, Ruth quickly tore off a strip of her underskirt. Hasty search in the locker brought to light, in addition to various tools, an oil-can and a box of matches.

Saturating the cloth with the contents of the can, she twisted it into a rude torch, and applied a match, just as the headlight of the locomotive flashed into view.

Springing to her feet, Ruth Sharon raised her improvised torch, and waved it frantically, at the same time pressing the foot-brake that checked the motion of the car.

Fanned by the wind, the beacon-light blazed brightly, flashing its warning to the keen eye of the engineer.

The panting monster moved slower—slower, and paused at last, its giant eye gleaming full upon the frail hand-car and its fearless occupant.

Headlight Harry, followed by his fireman, sprung from the engine and hurried forward. In utter astonishment he beheld the flagman's daughter.

"Ruth Sharon! What are you doing here?" he demanded, excitedly, as he clasped the brave girl in his arms.

A crowd of passengers and trainmen had gathered round, impatient to learn the cause of the delay. Ruth hastened to explain, much to the surprise of all.

"Your bravery is unparalleled, young lady, and shall certainly meet with its reward," declared Conductor Chase, who had charge of the train. "Now, then, Hilton, move ahead cautiously. I hope the obstacle is not too great to be removed; otherwise, we must return to Vinton for assistance."

"But the train-wreckers?"

"Pshaw! Little fear of them, for they will hardly dare attack us now, knowing we are prepared to give them a warm reception."

Headlight Harry shook his head doubtfully. However, Chase was in authority, and the youth mounted his engine without another word.

Ruth Sharon was permitted to ride with her lover, while the hand-car that brought her on her merciful errand was also taken aboard.

The train moved ahead slowly and ten minutes later arrived in the dangerous Devil's Ditch.

It was seen at a glance that the boulder was too heavy to be removed. Nothing but powder and drill could affect the ponderous mass, and to procure the necessary implements for blasting it was necessary to return to Vinton, a station several miles away.

A brakeman was sent ahead to signal all approaching trains, while the Express started on the backward run.

Nothing was seen of the would-be wreckers, and the passengers breathed more freely as the train bowled smoothly along.

Headlight Harry, however, still scented danger. A subtle instinct told him they were running into a trap. Standing in his cab, he eagerly sought to pierce the gloom.

Suddenly there came a peculiar, grating sound, instantly followed by a violent, jarring motion of the cars. The experienced engineer knew the meaning well.

The train had left the track!

Leaning far out of the cab, Headlight Harry peered anxiously ahead.

At this moment a number of shadowy forms rushed toward the cars, while the air echoed with the sound of rapidly exploding fire-arms!

CHAPTER VI.

THE WHITE PHENIX SCORES A VICTORY.

THE Express train had been saved from one trap, only to run unwittingly into another! The devilish cunning of the White Phenix had asserted itself, and rendered fruitless the heroic efforts of Ruth Sharon.

When, passing safely under the descending boulder, the brave girl sped on her errand of warning, defying the futile shots of the train-wreckers, the latter hurried to the track, making the very air sulphurous with their oaths. Disgustedly they hovered near the spot, breathing dire vengeance upon her who had thwarted their cunning plans.

But as the headlight of the locomotive flashed into view, it was seen that the trainmen were boldly advancing to investigate; and instantly the White Phenix's artful brain conjured a plan whereby to retrieve disaster.

Crouching in a thicket, at a point several hundred yards from where the enormous rock blocked the way, the five wreckers lay low while the train moved slowly past. When the last car was at a safe distance, the men sprung energetically to work to place a new obstruction in the path of the ill-starred train.

Directed by the white-faced outlaw, the work was speedily accomplished. Four rails, two on either side, were quickly unspiked and hurled down the embankment. Before further mischief could be done, the train was heard returning.

Dropping their tools, the wreckers retreated to cover, while weapons were drawn and made ready for service.

No hope for the doomed train, now! Cunning machinations had completed a trap from which there was no escape!

Running backward, there was no headlight to reveal the ugly gulf in the track; and those aboard knew nothing of this new peril until the wheels of the first car left the rails.

There was a tremendous jarring and shaking, as the wheels pounded over the bare sleepers; then the cars, overturning, pitched down the embankment, and lay upon their sides in the ditch.

The smoker, dragged down by the two passenger-cars, was wrenched loose from the Mail and Express car, which, together with the engine, still kept the irons.

As the ill-fated train plunged down the embankment, there ensued a scene wild and exciting. Scores of passengers, some severely injured, most of them bruised, and all in a state of wild confusion, struggled desperately to escape from the overturned cars.

Those who escaped the fearful plunge, heard the piteous cries of their less fortunate fellows, and hastened to release them from the chaos of shattered timbers.

At this moment, the train robbers made a quick and determined assault.

Yelling like fiends, they came on, swiftly discharging their weapons as they advanced. The Mail and Express car was the object of attack. White Phenix led the rush, his ghastly face gleaming with demoniacal triumph, and at his heels darted the horrible form of the black Swamp Demon. Duke Derby, with his two gambler associates, followed close behind, entering into this, their first train robbery, with a spirit worthy of a better cause.

In that moment of wild confusion, attention was centered upon the wrecked cars and the imprisoned occupants so the bandits met with but little opposition.

The men who occupied the coveted car were too surprised to offer much resistance, and after a few ineffectual shots, went down before the deadly fire of the marauders.

The latter were now masters of the situation. The valuable contents of the car were at their disposal, and the rascals worked rapidly to gather up the available plunder.

Meantime, Headlight Harry had not been idle. At the first admonition of danger, he comprehended the truth, and quickly reversed his engine, hoping to save at least a portion of the train at least from derailment.

This successfully accomplished, he drew a revolver and eagerly watched for an opportunity to strike a blow in defense of the train. But the Mail car was already captured.

Pell-mell, the victorious outlaws, spoil-laden, now beat a hasty retreat. As they fled, Duke Derby caught sight of Ruth Sharon, who

crouched tremblingly in the cab of the Wildfire. With a joyous shout he darted toward her.

Headlight Harry's nerves were like steel, as he deliberately drew a bead on the advancing robber and pulled trigger. The weapon hung fire!

Before he could raise the hammer to fire again, Duke Derby bounded into the cab like a tiger, and grappled with the engineer. Struggling furiously, they tripped and went down together. Unfortunately, Headlight Harry fell undermost, and his head struck the floor with a force that rendered him for the moment unconscious.

Rufe Ruffle sprung to aid his friend, but a bullet from the weapon of an outlaw laid him low.

Scrambling to his feet, Duke Derby seized the terrified maiden in his arms. With an inarticulate cry of triumph, the ruffian leaped from the engine with his prize, and followed after his associates who were already in full retreat.

At this moment Headlight Harry recovered his senses, and struggled to his feet just in time to view the flying gambler as he bore away Ruth Sharon.

Immediately the bold youth rushed headlong in pursuit, without pausing to consider the possible consequences of so rash an act. The knowledge that pretty Ruth was in the hands of the bandits caused his blood to boil with fury, and, alone and unaided, he dashed madly in the direction taken by the night marauders.

The latter took to the woods, and precipitately made their way through the tangled undergrowth. Guided by their heavy footsteps, Headlight Harry found no difficulty in following. Soon, however, the voice of the White Phenix could be heard, directing his followers to moderate their speed.

"No need of breaking our necks," he said, gruffly. "The galoots yonder are too busy saving their own precious skins, to think of pursuit. Now, let's halt and make a brief examination of our booty. Perhaps some of these bundles are of no use to us; in which case we are only incurring ourselves with worthless weight."

As the freebooters paused, by no means loth to rest from their heavy load, Headlight Harry, who was only a short distance in the rear, also stopped abruptly; but his foot slipped, and he was precipitated into a clump of tangled bushes, with a noise that reached the ears of the robbers.

Instantly the latter were on the alert.

"Look alive, boys! We are followed!" cried the White Phenix.

Entangled among the treacherous boughs and vines, the young engineer struggled to regain his feet, just as the huge form of the terrible Swamp Demon came toward him with long, panther-like bounds.

Unable to rise, the youth, who still held his revolver in his hand, lifted the weapon and nervously blazed away at the advancing shape.

Thrice the pistol spoke in quick succession, but the bullets all flew wide; and with a ferocious snarl the black Demon hurled himself upon his victim.

Headlight Harry struggled desperately, but he was like an infant in the grasp of that horrible being, whose long, bony fingers encircled his throat in a deathlike grip. In a few moments the luckless engineer lay motionless upon the sward.

By this time the others had reached the spot, and White Phenix dragged the Swamp Demon from his prey.

"Easy, there, Demon! Let's see what fine bird you have caught, before you tear him to pieces."

Matches were struck, and by their light the bandits scrutinized the still, pale face of the engineer.

"Headlight Harry! Why, I thought I had finished the fellow," ejaculated Duke Derby.

The white-faced leader smiled grimly.

"From present indications, it would seem that my faithful imp has completed the job for you. Yet, see! His heart still beats! He has more lives than the traditional cat. Well, I am glad I pulled the Demon off in time, for, you see, I have an old grudge against this young gentleman, and I prefer to settle the score in my own peculiar way."

Duke Derby was satisfied.

"The idea suits me," he said. "I, too, have a grudge against the fellow, but I yield to your prior claim. So long as the young upstart is effectually squelched, I have no cause to complain."

Without further delay, the outlaws now prepared to continue their flight. The mail-bags

and other articles of plunder were arranged in more portable shapes, and the way was resumed, each man bearing his allotted burden.

The fiend-like swamp-dweller brought up the rear, and upon his broad back he carried, with ridiculous ease, the inanimate form of Headlight Harry.

CHAPTER VII.

THE DUMB SENTINEL.

MEANWHILE, how fared the prisoners at the stronghold in the swamp?

When the White Phenix took his departure, after delivering his lengthy speech, Ralph Renwood was left alone to contemplate the horrors of the situation.

He had not the slightest doubt that the outlaw would execute his diabolical threat, and racked his brain to devise some way of averting the vengeance of his arch-enemy.

From where he lay the young man could see and talk with his wife in the adjoining apartment, and strove to cheer her with consoling words; but within his breast he felt the situation to be indeed a hopeless one.

The hours wore slowly away. About midday the giant African again appeared, bearing a generous supply of food. It was not the White Phenix's intention to starve his captives, at any rate.

Setting down the food, the hunchback liberated Renwood's arms and assisted him to a sitting posture, after which he fell back a few steps, and stood, with a malicious grin, watchfully regarding the captive.

Although Ralph's arms were free, his limbs were still tightly bound, and there was no hope of escape so long as the keen-eyed Swamp Demon stood there, armed to the teeth.

The young superintendent did not ignore the proffered meal. Realizing the prudence of preserving all his strength, he partook heartily of the food, which, though rudely cooked, was by no means unpalatable.

Food was also proffered Grace, but she refused to eat.

After the meal was finished the black guard deliberately replaced Ralph's bonds, then, still grinning demoniacally, silently withdrew.

Once more left alone, Ralph Renwood, as he lay upon the floor of the cabin, chanced to see a faint ray of light that gleamed through an oriifice in the wall.

Rolling over and over, he managed, with considerable difficulty, to reach a position where he could look through the opening, which was but a few inches above the floor.

In this manner he could obtain a partial view of the surroundings.

He saw that the cabin was in the center of a small clearing, encompassed by a dense growth of trees, through which the gleam of distant water might be seen.

Under shelter of a huge rock was kindled a roasting fire, over which the white-faced bandit and his grotesque companion were busily preparing their own meal. Ralph watched their movements intently.

After eating to their stomachs' satisfaction, the swamp-dwellers reclined at their ease upon the sward. The White Phenix was talking rapidly, emphasizing his remarks by frequent gestures; he was evidently explaining some interesting theme, for the hunchback listened with marked attention. Renwood strained his ears to catch the words of the outlaw, but the distance was too great.

The afternoon wore away, and as night approached, the two ruffians began to make active preparations for some event or other. Weapons were carefully cleaned and loaded; and, presently, the swamp-dwellers left the camp, without bestowing a glance at the captives.

From his loophole of observation, Ralph Renwood watched the forms of his foes, as they flitted among the trees and finally disappeared.

It was plain that they were bound on some important expedition: and the young man was surprised that the White Phenix should thus leave his prisoners unguarded. Doubtless the outlaw calculated that Ralph's bonds were strong enough to hold him safely until they returned.

What a chance for escape, if he could only free himself from the cords that held his limbs in a hempen vise!

The young man's eyes suddenly fell upon a shining object on the floor, which had hitherto escaped his notice. It was a long, keen-edged bowie, which had probably dropped from the belt of the Swamp Demon, and remained with its sharp point deeply imbedded in the floor.

The prisoner hailed this discovery with a cry of joy, for he saw a possible means of liberation.

Laboriously he wormed his way to the spot, assuming such a position that the sharp knife-blade pressed against the cord encircling his arms. Then, by a steady, oscillating motion, he sought to saw the obstinate bonds asunder.

It was a slow, laborious task, but the knife held firm, and steadily its keen blade performed the work of liberation. Soon the last strand parted with a snap.

Joyfully Ralph Renwood snatched up the weapon that had served him so opportunely. A vigorous slash released his feet, and he arose free at last.

His first act was to liberate his wife, who wept with joy at the excellent prospect of escape.

By this time darkness pervaded the gloomy recesses of the swamp. The wooded island was wrapped in gloom and silence.

Renwood felt that delay was dangerous, and prepared to leave the place at once, before the enemy returned.

He opened the door of the hut, and cautiously peered outside. Apparently the clearing was deserted. But as the young man took a step forward, a deep, ominous growl fell upon his startled ears, and two blazing orbs glared from out the darkness.

Ralph paused in surprise, just as the animal, an enormous bloodhound, leaped at his throat, with a ferocious snarl. Quickly recovering, the young man retreated within the hut, and closed the door in time to avoid the infuriated beast.

Here was a new and utterly unexpected phase to the situation. Renwood had forgotten the bloodhound, mentioned by White Phenix as being the faithful companion of the sable Swamp Demon; but now the huge brute made his presence manifest in a most forcible manner.

Peeping through a chink in the door, Ralph could see that the dumb sentinel still stood before the cabin, his glowing orbs fixed upon the entrance.

Armed only with a knife, the young man saw the sheer folly of attacking the formidable canine; and so the bloodhound remained master of the situation.

In a fever of anxiety, the young man paced the floor, vaguely planning how to dispose of this unlooked-for adversary. It was exasperating, when escape seemed so near, to be held at bay by a dog. Momentarily expecting his foes' return, Renwood planned to elude the watchful brute, and make a bold dash for freedom.

There was but one entrance to the hut; but Ralph, moving noiselessly to the rear, hastened to make another by cutting into the wall, which was constructed of deerskins laced together with thongs. Working rapidly, he soon made an opening of the requisite size.

A hasty glance from the front entrance revealed the basilisk eyes of the bloodhound, who still crouched at his post. Now for it! Cautiously Ralph led his wife through the hole in the wall, and together they moved stealthily into the thicket.

Better to risk a battle with the dog than remain tamely at bay till the arch-enemy returned.

But scarcely had the fugitives proceeded a hundred rods, when an ominous sound assailed their ears. It was the cry of the bloodhound! Already had he scented the fugitives!

Clasping Grace in his strong arms, Ralph Renwood darted ahead, heedless of where his footsteps led, thinking only to elude that terrible foe. Impenetrable gloom shrouded the path. Crashing through dense undergrowth, stumbling over rocks and logs, on—on he fled, with a speed born of desperation.

But of what avail was his flight against the superior fleetness of the four-footed pursuer!

The bloodhound came on with the persistency of Fate. Ralph could hear the ominous patter of feet, swiftly spurning the ground. Despairingly he looked quickly about for a place of refuge.

Close at hand loomed an enormous boulder, with precipitous sides, the top of which was flat, and fully a dozen feet from the ground. Could he reach it?

With an energy fairly superhuman the young man scrambled up the side of the rock, still clasping Grace in his arms, and finally succeeded in reaching the top, just as the dumb pursuer flashed upon the spot.

Expecting the beast would spring, Ralph whipped out his knife and braced himself for the struggle that would surely follow should

the animal reach his position; but the attack came not!

The bloodhound stopped at the base of the rock, and, squatting upon his broad haunches, fixed upon the shadowy forms of the fugitives orbs that gleamed with almost human sagacity. He seemed to comprehend that the couple were "treed," and evidently, in his doggish mind, determined to thus hold them at bay until his master, returning, should discover the loss of the prisoners and hurry on the trail.

Ralph Renwood viewed this proceeding with unutterable disgust. Thwarted again by this demon dog! He would have given all he possessed at that moment for a trusty revolver.

The rock upon which the fugitives crouched was split by a wide fissure, doubtless the work of lightning, and by dint of hard labor Ralph succeeded in dislodging a fragment several pounds in weight.

With both hands he raised the rock above his head and hurled it at the huge beast below. Unerringly the missile flew, striking the dog squarely between the gleaming eyes.

Ralph leaped exultantly from the boulder, to find the bloodhound stretched upon the ground with a shattered skull. However, "to make assurance doubly sure," he plunged his knife several times into the quivering body, then turned to assist Grace, satisfied that the formidable canine was effectually disposed of at last.

Yet, the fugitives were by no means "out of the woods." They were on an island several acres in extent, low and swampy except the portion where the huts were built, and surrounded by waters of unknown depth. How to traverse the dismal expanse of the swamp was a problem that now presented itself to the young superintendent.

But as, reaching the edge of the island, they cautiously moved along the bank, Ralph encountered an obstacle that proved to be a birch canoe, half-hidden among the reeds and grass. Delighted, he hastened to launch the craft, and after helping Grace to a seat, he himself embarked and paddled cautiously away.

Though ignorant whither he was going, Renwood knew that the great swamp had its outlet in a small stream that flowed into Mad River; and this outlet he hoped to discover.

It chanced that into this very creek luck directed the course of the canoe. Presently they approached a spot where the forest was less dense, and through the tree-tops mellow moonlight penetrated the swamp, lighting the dark, dismal waters with a ghostly radiance.

As the frail canoe shot silently into the moonlit space, Ralph Renwood was astonished to hear voices ahead, mingled with the splash of oars. At the same time two boats, laden with men, flashed into sight; and in the foremost, his blazing eyes fixed triumphantly on the luckless fugitives, rode the death-faced White Phenix!

CHAPTER VIII.

LOST IN THE SWAMP.

AFTER a long period of unconsciousness, Headlight Harry opened his eyes. The lad's head was spinning like a top, and for some time he failed to comprehend his situation; but his aching throat brought to mind the grip of the Swamp Demon's bony talons, and gradually he recalled the stirring events connected with the train-robbery.

The outlaws, embarked in two boats, were industriously making their way among the water-courses of a vast swamp. Darkness shrouded the scene, for only at intervals did the moon's rays penetrate the dismal depths. Giant trees arose on every hand. The mournful hoot of the owl, or the shrill cry of the nighthawk, mingled with the sullen splash of oars, were the only sounds that broke the silence.

Winding between bogs and half-submerged islands, the bandits guided the boats, cursing at numerous snags and fallen trees that frequently retarded progress. The first boat contained the White Phenix, sitting in the bow; his hideous satellite, the Swamp Demon, whose powerful arms untiringly propelled the craft; also, Duke Derby, who sat in the stern, with Ruth Sharon clasped in his arms.

The other boat, following a few yards behind, was occupied by the worthy pair of gamblers, one of whom rowed, while the other maintained a comfortable position upon the legs of Headlight Harry, who lay near the stern. This craft also carried the bulk of the robbers' plunder.

All these details were duly observed by the young engineer, from his position in the boat. Shrewdly he lay without moving a muscle, and while the two gamblers fondly believed him still

unconscious, the wide-awake youth was planning with busy brain.

His captors had not troubled to bind him, but the weight of the burly fellow who sat upon his legs formed an excellent preventative to easy flight.

Headlight Harry, aware that Ruth was in the power of the outlaws, knew that, free, he could be of far more service to the girl than if a fellow-prisoner; and he decided to make a bold break for liberty.

Bringing every nerve and muscle to bear, the engineer gave a mighty heave, nearly overturning the boat, and completely upsetting his nearest foe, who little expected so marvelous a display of energy.

The robber pitched violently forward into the arms of his associate, who dropped the oars, and, losing his balance, fell back in the bottom of the craft.

Taking advantage of the temporary confusion, Headlight Harry quietly slipped over the boat's side into the water, just as the occupants of the first craft, hearing the disturbance, bore down upon the scene.

The youth was at home in the water, and dropping noiselessly beneath the surface, swam away like a fish. When at length, unable to longer breathe, he came up for air, it was to find himself many feet from the boats, and close to the shore.

Under shelter of an overhanging bank, he keenly watched the movements of the outlaws, who were making strenuous efforts to find the escaped captive. The ruffians were greatly incensed at the occurrence, particularly the White Phenix, who cursed until the very air seemed redolent of sulphur and brimstone.

As the boats darted to and fro, Headlight Harry, secure under cover of darkness, laughed at the fruitless efforts of the enemy. But, presently, elation gave place to dismay! The bandits suddenly shaped their course toward the shore, evidently suspecting that the youth was concealed somewhere among the tangled growth of water-plants and grasses.

Headlight Harry saw, with disgust, that one of the boats containing his foes was advancing straight toward his hiding-place. As they slowly skirted the bank, one of the men stood with uplifted oar, with which he viciously prodded every object that might possibly shelter a fugitive.

The young engineer feared this operation would result in driving him from his refuge. Clinging to a projecting limb with one hand, he hung motionless as a statue, submerged to the chin. Keenly he watched the craft approach, until it was fairly opposite. Then, quickly relinquishing his grasp, he sank beneath the surface, just as the oar of the inquisitive boatman descended upon the very spot where his head had been.

The slight noise made in executing this movement was drowned by the splash of the descending oar, and so the occupants of the boat kept on in blissful ignorance of the cunning trick just performed beneath their very noses.

When Headlight Harry came to the surface the enemy were fully ten yards away, and he hastened to regain his position, chuckling gaily at the success of his ruse.

The swamp-fiends now gave up the search in disgust. As a last resort they drew their weapons and fired shot after shot at random, hoping, perchance, to strike the concealed fugitive.

Bullets flew promiscuously in every direction, but the engineer escaped injury, though some of the missiles came dangerously near. After emptying their revolvers the robbers abandoned this wholesale waste of ammunition and reluctantly continued their way.

The sound of oars grew fainter, finally dying away, and once more silence reigned over the dismal expanses of the great swamp.

Headlight Harry's heart was heavy, for, though himself free, the fair girl he loved was being borne away into a terrible captivity. While fully resolved to exert himself to the utmost in Ruth's behalf, yet the youth realized that, against such formidable odds, his own unaided efforts would be of little avail, and so wisely concluded to look for assistance before trailing down the denizens of the swamp.

Satisfied that the latter would not return, the engineer left his hiding-place and laboriously climbed the shelving bank. His feelings, mental and bodily, were by no means comfortable. The icy waters of the creek had chilled him to the bone, and he shook and shivered in the crisp night-air.

Darkness pervaded the scene, so dense that he could scarcely see a hand before him. Totally

The White Phenix.

ignorant of his whereabouts, the youth hesitated to advance, and it was with the utmost caution that he moved ahead. His first steps precipitated him into a treacherous hole filled with water, from which he extricated himself with difficulty.

Undaunted, Headlight Harry again started, but after a few minutes' blind stumbling among the treacherous bogs, with several narrow escapes from disaster, he wisely concluded to wait for the light of day ere venturing further into the unknown mazes of the swamp.

Reaching a neighboring tree, he ensconced himself upon a convenient branch. Under the circumstances sleep was out of the question, so, chilled to the bone, the youth waited impatiently for the dawn of day.

After hours that seemed as days to the weary engineer, objects began to grow distinct. It was a dreary prospect! In every direction, as far as the eye could reach, spread a cheerless expanse of swampy land. A waste of foul, slimy waters; low islands densely covered with great moss-grown trees; quagmires and bogs, dangerous to the foot and overgrown with rank grass and weeds; a region dismal, awe-inspiring, fit only for the habitation of its natural denizens—owls, bats and hideous reptiles!

Headlight Harry shudderingly gazed upon this forbidding waste, through which he must make his way. He was at a loss which way to proceed, but after due deliberation he commenced the perilous journey, shaping a course which he believed would soon bring him to the edge of the swamp.

He proceeded slowly and laboriously, leaping from bog to bog; or when the distance was too great to cover by jumping, he pluckily waded or swam the stagnant waters, slime-covered and reeking with misty vapors, over which myriad water-snakes, hideous but harmless, hissing glided to and fro.

Undaunted at the many obstacles confronting him, Headlight Harry kept determinedly on. Luckless youth! Unconsciously he had taken the wrong direction, and every step only led him deeper into the weird mazes of the vast swamp.

For long, weary hours he pressed hopefully onward, until, though ignorant of the fact, he was fairly in the center of the marsh. Reaching an elevation higher and drier than the others, the youth concluded to snatch a few moments of much-needed rest ere continuing his laborious way.

Approaching a group of rocks, he threw himself upon the nearest, rejoiced to find even so comfortless a resting-place for his exhausted frame. Ominous sounds reached the young man's ears, and he bounded quickly to his feet again.

The spot was a veritable den of snakes, scores of which writhed hissing at his feet, stirred into activity by the sudden and unwelcome intrusion!

With a yell of horror, Headlight Harry fled madly from the hideous reptiles. Long, powerful bounds carried him swiftly from the obnoxious spot.

Suddenly his flight was checked. As, scarcely heeding where he went, the young engineer crashed into an adjacent thicket, the ground opened beneath his feet, and he fell down, down into utter darkness!

CHAPTER IX.

IN THE TOILS.

HEADLIGHT HARRY dropped swiftly through space, bringing up with a jar that nearly drove the breath from his body. Fortunately, he landed upon his feet, escaping serious injury; and after assuring himself that his anatomy was still entire, the youth hastened to examine the place into which he had been so abruptly precipitated.

He found himself at the bottom of a pit or shaft, sunk perpendicularly into the ground to a distance of perhaps twenty feet. The shaft was only a few feet in width, and the top was carefully covered with a pile of brushwood, through which Headlight Harry had involuntarily made his way.

By the light that streamed through this opening, the youth could see an object hanging upon the side of the pit, which, on closer inspection, proved to be a narrow ladder, neatly constructed of rope.

At the foot of the shaft a tunnel led to some unknown point underground.

Headlight Harry was greatly astonished at this discovery. The underground passage, the shaft with its cunningly contrived exit, were all doubtless the handiwork of man. He felt that

human beings were in the vicinity; perchance, the very gang for whom he searched.

The young engineer peered inquisitively into the mouth of the tunnel. Utter darkness reigned, and he had no means of procuring a light. Determined to explore the mysterious passage, the youth advanced courageously.

He proceeded with the utmost caution, lest a chance misstep might plunge him into some unseen abyss. The tunnel was narrow and seemed to ascend gradually.

After advancing, as he judged, fully three hundred yards, Headlight Harry was surprised to find that the passage abruptly terminated. On all sides he was confronted by the solid earth.

While marveling at this peculiar situation, a happy thought led the engineer to examine the roof above his head.

His hand touched what were, unmistakably, boards. This, then, was the exit from the tunnel. By pressing against the boards, he found that they could easily be uplifted.

But Headlight Harry now hesitated. Anxious though he was to penetrate the secret of the underground passage, yet discretion held him back. To leave the tunnel meant, perhaps, to walk into the very midst of his enemies, and, alone and unarmed as he was, such a move was suicidal.

After long hesitation, however, the young man's curiosity mastered his fears. Nerving himself for what might follow, he threw his shoulders against the frail barrier, which instantly yielded.

Boards and bearskins were hurled one side, and Headlight Harry, popping up through the opening like a jack-in-the-box, uttered a sharp cry of amazement, for he found himself looking into a small apartment, and face to face with his friend, Ralph Renwood!

The surprise was reciprocal. In mute wonder, the young superintendent stared at the familiar figure of his friend, who had risen through the floor as if by magic, still dripping with the waters of the swamp.

"Headlight Harry! Is it you, or your ghost?" he managed to utter.

"It's the genuine article, old pard; real flesh and blood, you bet," assured the engineer, rushing eagerly to the side of his pinioned friend. "But I say, old feller, how come you here, hey?"

For Harry was amazed to find Ralph Renwood in this place. Nothing had been seen of the superintendent since his sudden disappearance, the very night that Grace was boldly abducted from the Garland mansion, and his whereabouts were clothed in profound mystery.

Mutual explanations were at once in order. Ralph first related his adventures—how, after being brought to the swamp-island, he at last succeeded in escaping with Grace, only to fall again into the hands of the outlaws, as they were returning from their plundering expedition. Then Headlight Harry told of the train robbery, and briefly depicted his subsequent adventures, ending with the lucky discovery of the underground passage which conducted him to the side of his friends.

Ralph Renwood was already aware of the robbery, for, as he explained, he obtained the information from Ruth Sharon, who now shared with Grace the adjacent room.

Headlight Harry was gladly welcomed by the trio of disconsolate prisoners. Always light-hearted and cheerful, the presence of the intrepid young fellow inspired his friends with renewed hope.

Immediately the two young men planned to leave the island. Although the subterranean passage was available, there was no means of traversing the watery expanse by which they were surrounded, unless one of the outlaws' boats might be obtained. This could only be accomplished under cover of darkness.

Therefore it was decided to wait till night, before attempting the escape. In the meantime Headlight Harry was to retire to the tunnel, carefully replacing the flooring, while Ralph retained his bonds, in order to divert suspicion, should any of the gang visit the hut.

Their plans thus satisfactorily arranged, the engineer bade his friends a cheery "Good-by," and turned to leave the cabin.

At that moment the door flew open, and there stood the distorted form of the dread Swamp-Demon.

A ferocious snarl escaped the monster's lips, as he gave a prodigious bound forward, with long arms outstretched to grasp the retreating engineer. Taken entirely by surprise, Headlight Harry had no time to reach the tunnel, but

as the fiend reached out to seize him, the adroit youth bent suddenly and darted like a flash between the great bowed legs. When the baffled negro turned, Harry had reached the door.

Dashing pell-mell from the hut, the youth found himself in the very midst of the Swamp Outlaws, who, hearing the disturbance, were hastening to the scene.

Headlight Harry's only chance was in prompt and fearless action. Like a human thunderbolt he shot among the bandits, striking out energetically with his fists, which were his only weapons.

In rapid succession two men went down like ninepins, and, taking advantage of the momentary confusion into which his tempestuous rush threw the enemy, Harry cleared himself of the group and raced madly away.

Flitting lightly among the trees, he quickly reached the shore. Three boats were drawn up on the bank. Into one of these Headlight Harry bounded. Confusion! The oars had been removed! The craft was practically useless.

No time to reach the other boats, for the outlaws were in hot pursuit. With a defiant shout the engineer leaped into the water and swam desperately away.

The robbers came racing down to the shore. The pale-faced chieftain led the van, and in his hands he held a long lariat, which he uncoiled as he ran. There was a demoniacal smile wreathing the lips of the White Phenix, as he noted the frantic efforts of the swimmer. Pausing on the bank, he coolly measured the distance, and with the utmost confidence made his cast.

For years a cowboy, the hand of the chief had not lost its cunning. The lasso sped through the air like a great black snake, and the noose unerringly settled over the head of the receding swimmer.

Struggling vainly to throw off the cruel cord that encircled his neck, Headlight Harry was dragged backward through the water by remorseless hands, and finally landed on the bank, nearly suffocated by the noose, and in an exhausted condition.

The outlaws gathered around their prisoner in high glee.

"So, my slippery young friend, you are again our guest," laughed the White Phenix. "This time I'll see that you don't depart so uncenoniously. Smart as you are, it's dollars to doughnuts you've cut your last caper, Headlight Harry."

The young engineer was securely bound, and placed within the prison hut to join his companions in misery. The prospects were dismal enough, now; and the feelings of the captives, once buoyant with hope, were suddenly plunged to the depths of despair!

CHAPTER X.

THE PHENIX IN MISCHIEF.

SUCH events as have been depicted in the preceding chapters had served to plunge the good people of Richville into a state of feverish excitement nigh bordering on frenzy.

First, the abduction of Grace Renwood, coupled with her husband's sudden disappearance, aroused popular indignation and furnished ample food for conjecture; then quickly followed an afterclap, in the form of the Express train wreckage, which resulted in the loss of several lives, to say nothing of the valuable property carried away by the audacious freebooters. These successive outrages were all-sufficient to kindle the wrath of a righteous community.

Gilbert Garland, the wealthy railroad magnate, promptly offered a reward of \$10,000 for the recovery of his daughter and apprehension of her abductor; while this was supplemented by an equally liberal offer, in behalf of the company, for the capture of those concerned in the train-robbery.

Stimulated by such munificent promises, strenuous efforts were being made to apprehend the offenders. Parties of armed men scoured the country in all directions, with ill-success, yet ever hopeful; while among those whom circumstances compelled to remain at home, the recent outrages formed an all-absorbing topic of conversation.

It was the night following that of the memorable train-robbery, when Gilbert Garland, the millionaire, sat alone in a cosey corner of his magnificent mansion. This room, his own private study, was located in one of the wings, its windows looking upon a verdant lawn. Everything in the luxuriously furnished apartment pointed to the wealth and refinement of the owner.

Here sat the great magnate in his cosey easy-chair, his head bowed between his hands—a picture of misery and despair. Bereft of a

faithful, loving wife long years ago, the affections of Gilbert Garland had since been centered on his only child, Grace, whom he fairly idolized, and this terrible blow struck to the very heart of the millionaire.

Two days had now elapsed since the abduction, and still no hope; for the abductors had concealed their trail so effectually as to defy detection. Garland despaired of ever seeing his darling child again.

The hour grew late, and all the servants had retired, but still the light burned brightly in the study, where the master sat with bowed head and a heart wrung with agony.

Suddenly a slight noise reached his ears—an unmistakable cough; and Garland looked up in surprise, to behold—

A tall, stalwart form, enveloped in a somber cloak; a face heavily bearded, and half concealed by a broad-brimmed hat! Thus appeared the man who, with folded arms, stood calmly contemplating Gilbert Garland.

"The devil!" gasped the latter, in unfeigned amazement, bewilderedly rubbing his eyes as if to assure himself he was not dreaming.

"No; only a friend of his," returned the intruder, quietly.

"Well, where in thunder did you come from, and how did you get in here?" demanded the mystified gentleman, for the door was closed and fastened.

In response, the stranger nodded carelessly toward the window, which had been left open, as the night was oppressively warm. By this means he had effected an entrance, and noiselessly tiptoed over the velvety carpet to his present position.

Gilbert Garland was dumfounded at the cool effrontery of his visitor; but he was not wanting in courage, and faced the intruder determinedly.

"Well, sir, now that you are here, kindly state your errand. I am anxious to learn the cause of this unwarrantable intrusion," and the magnate's voice rung with indignation.

The midnight visitor whipped from beneath his cloak a huge sheet of paper, which he flourished before the face of the other.

It was a gigantic poster, one of the hundreds which Gilbert Garland had caused to be plastered all over the town, proclaiming the loss of his daughter, and bearing at its head the magic legend:

"\$10,000 REWARD!"

"In regard to this matter I have visited you," declared the stranger. "As your name is appended to the placard, I infer you are the proper person to apply to for the reward."

For the reward! At these words, Gilbert Garland's heart gave an impulsive leap.

"What do you mean? Speak, man! Do you know aught of my daughter's whereabouts?" he eagerly demanded, leaping excitedly to his feet.

"Compose yourself, my dear sir, and allow me to explain in my own fashion," said the man in the cloak, coolly waving him back. "Ah! I see you have refreshments. Pardon me for my boldness, but my inner man cries aloud for sustenance."

He made his way to a convenient sideboard containing wine and cigars of the choicest brands, and proceeded to sample the beverages with great gusto. From port to sherry, from sherry to madeira, he flitted with an appetite that was astonishing, pausing at last from the wholesale slaughter of drinkables, only to fill his capacious pockets with choice Havanas. Then lighting a fragrant weed he drew up the most comfortable chair he could find and complacently seated himself opposite the dumfounded capitalist, who had viewed the movements of his visitor with disgust and anger.

"Sir, you astonish me!" exclaimed the latter, indignantly. "For pure, unadulterated self-assurance, you are certainly entitled to the premium."

"Exactly!" laughed the midnight visitor. "However, you will pardon my little eccentricities when you hear the good news I have in store for you."

"Ah! Concerning my daughter?"

"Precisely!"

"Well, sir?" anxiously.

"To commence with, does this reward business go? That is, is this \$10,000 a *bona fide* offer, or only a blind?"

"My name, sir, should vouch for the reliability of the offer. The man who furnishes the required information shall be \$10,000 richer for his services."

"Good! Now for the other reward—is that straight, also?"

"You refer to the train-robbery?"

"Exactly."

"Then, I assure you the company will do precisely as they promise."

"Well, I suppose I must claim the \$20,000," said the cloaked stranger, with an assumed air of nonchalance, "for I possess the information so highly prized."

"The deuce you say! Hasten to explain, sir!" cried the excited magnate.

"To be brief, I am acquainted with the person who kidnapped your daughter. He is an outlaw who styles himself the White Phenix, and is also the leader of the party that robbed the Express last night."

"And his whereabouts?"

"He can easily be found. In fact, the fellow is at this moment within the limits of Richville."

"I will send at once for the sheriff. Then you shall conduct us to the haunt of the man you accuse, and if your story proves true, the reward is yours," and Gilbert Garland arose and looked excitedly for his hat.

But the stranger calmly waved him back.

"Not so fast, my dear sir," he said, coolly. "What security have I to show that you will really pay the reward as you agree?"

"My word as a gentleman, sir."

"Bah! Excuse me, but I prefer something more substantial."

"Well, what do you demand?"

"Five thousand dollars, to be placed in my hands before we leave this room."

"But, providing I do as you demand, what reason have I to believe you will keep your part of the compact?" inquired the rich man, suspiciously.

"You have *my* word as a gentleman," returned the visitor, sarcastically. "Come, do you accept the terms? If not, I will go," and he turned toward the window, as if to depart.

"Stop!" cried Gilbert Garland, promptly. "I agree to your proposition."

"Very good. Hold on—no checks. Common bank notes are good enough for me," as the magnate produced a pocket check-book.

So Garland brought to view a plethoric wallet, the contents of which he rapidly counted.

"Not quite three thousand here," he said, briefly. "Is not that sufficient for earnest money?"

"Hardly. Yet, there's your watch, chain, diamond pin, etc., which will make a very acceptable guaranty for the balance," suggested the stranger, whose keen eyes were fixed admiringly upon the sparkling jewels of the railroad prince.

Gilbert Garland hesitated but a moment, for the prospect of recovering his daughter overcame whatever doubts he may have entertained of the visitor's sincerity; and his valuables, together with the roll of bills, were promptly placed between the eager palms of the man in the cloak.

"Now, if your rapacity is glutted, we will go," declared the magnate.

But the other only laughed derisively, as he stowed away the "plunder."

"No need for such a course, I assure you," he said, coolly. "The place for you, dear sir, is in bed, where you had best remain until you recover the proper use of your brains."

"What do you mean?"

"Simply that you are a fool. I have been working you for a sucker, and I must say you caught at the bait to the queen's own taste."

"Then you are an impostor?" demanded Garland, wrathfully.

"By no means; for I will keep my promise. I agreed to show you the man you want so badly, but to do so it is not necessary to leave this room. If you wish to see the one who stole away your daughter to be his bride, who holds prisoner your precious son-in-law, who planned and led the attack on the Night Express, and who hoodwinked so completely your own august self—then look at me, for I am the White Phenix!"

The long cloak was flung aside, while a quick motion of the hand removed the false beard, revealing the milk-white face of the outlaw captain.

Gilbert Garland staggered back, dumb with amazement, while the White Phenix regarded him with a demoniacal smile.

"Pardon me if I have shocked your sensitive nerves," he sarcastically exclaimed. "You see, I hit upon this as a novel scheme to swell my private exchequer. Now that the pigeon is plucked, nothing remains for me but to bid you good-night and pleasant dreams!"

Recovering his self-possession, the enraged railway prince rushed to the wall and energetic-

ally pulled a projecting knob. Instantly the sharp ting-a-ling of many bells sounded a wild alarm through the silent mansion.

The White Phenix laughed scornfully as he leisurely turned to retreat; but Gilbert Garland threw himself in the way, and grappled determinedly with his enemy.

Exerting all his gigantic strength, the masked outlaw lifted his weaker adversary in his arms and dashed him fiercely to the floor, where he lay stunned and bleeding.

At this moment a group of servants, awakened by the alarm, dashed breathlessly into the room, just in time to catch a fleeting glimpse of the White Phenix, who leaped through the open window with a single bound.

Several hasty shots were fired, but a taunting laugh answered them, as the audacious bandit fled swiftly across the lawn, and was swallowed up in the gloom!

An hour later, silence deep and unbroken reigned over thriving Richville. The town was wrapped in slumber. Scarcely a light to be seen, and not a soul astir to disturb the solitude of the deserted streets. The night was dark and sultry—the sky pervaded by an inky blackness that dimmed the very stars!

But this wondrous quietude was destined to be rudely disturbed. An observer might have suddenly seen a bright tongue of flame shoot upward, followed quickly by another, and still another, until at last it developed into a broad sheet of fire, leaping, raging heavenward, blazing with startling vividness against the murky sky.

Higher, fiercer, until the inmates of the burning building awoke to their danger, and rushed half-clothed into the street.

"Fire! fire!"

Quickly the dread alarm was sounded, awakening the echoes of the once silent streets. Roused from peaceful slumber, the inhabitants hurried forth to face a new disaster—to begin a fearful struggle with the grim fire-fiend!

And now, even as the townsmen hurried to the scene of the conflagration, a second alarm was sounded from an opposite quarter; and this was quickly followed by yet another.

Three distinct fires were now raging. Clearly this was the work of some fiendish incendiary. The situation was well calculated to appall the stoutest heart, for the entire community seemed doomed to destruction!

As the flames of the burning buildings leaped higher and higher, reddening earth and sky with a vivid glow, and the affrighted people of Richville united in a gallant effort to save life and property, two horsemen rode leisurely along a lonely road that led from the fated town.

The White Phenix was the first rider, while the short, misshapen being who dogged his steps was no other than the ungainly Swamp Demon.

"Ha, ha! Nobly done, my peerless Demon," laughed the white-faced chief, with a gloating glance behind. "Now, away to the swamp island, for we deserve a good rest after this grand night's work!"

Spurring their steeds, the fire-fiends dashed swiftly away, while behind them the terrible conflagration, kindled by their remorseless hands, spread with frightful velocity, wrapping the doomed town in its fiery embrace!

CHAPTER XI.

AN ILL-STARR'D REBELLION.

WHILE the White Phenix and his black satellite skulked through the by-ways of Richville, intent upon their mission of rapine and ruin, other events were transpiring on the swamp island, which, if not so startling, had an important bearing upon the future of all our characters.

Although the new "brotherhood" had been in existence scarcely four-and-twenty hours, yet already seeds of dissension were sown among its members.

Soon after reaching the stronghold, on the morning after the train-robbery, the White Phenix had called his colleagues together, for the purpose of dividing the spoils. The mail-bags were cut open, and every package and letter carefully examined. There was a large registered mail, added to which the contents of many valuable Express parcels, helped to swell the sum total to quite a respectable amount.

As leader of the band, the White Phenix claimed one-half of the plunder, and, with characteristic assurance, promptly appropriated the same. A portion of this, he said, was the share of the Swamp Demon, but the entire amount went straight into the captain's own

capacious pocket, and as the huge negro was entirely subservient to his master's will, there was little likelihood that the former would ever finger a cent of the ill-gained boodle.

This left the remaining half to be divided among the three gamblers, all of whom failed to appreciate such an unequal division. Duke Derby, in particular, was quick to feel the injustice done to him and his associates, but, at the same time, he knew the danger of questioning the authority of such a man as the White Phenix, so he discreetly held his tongue, awaiting a more favorable opportunity to evince his displeasure.

Of these insubordinate feelings the robber chief had no suspicion; and when night came he went away, accompanied by the Swamp Demon, ostensibly to obtain new men for the band, but in reality to execute a cunningly-laid scheme of his own, as shown in the foregoing chapter. Thus the camp and prisoners were left in charge of Lieutenant Derby and his two worthy associates.

Here was the opportunity for which Duke Derby was looking; and scarcely had the boat containing the White Phenix disappeared when he called his companions for consultation.

"See here, pards, I'm sick of this bargain already," he began, impetuously. "When I went into this thing, it was with the understanding that all plunder should be divided equally, share and share alike, without distinction as to rank. Now, at the very outset, this chap who calls himself White Phenix takes advantage of his position as captain, and shows his voracious greed by deliberately pocketing the lion's share of the spoils. I, for one, object to playing second fiddle to this cheeky individual with the milky face. What say you, boys?"

"Your sentiments suit us to a t, Duke," one of the gamblers promptly responded.

"Good! Then from this moment our allegiance to the White Phenix is eternally dissolved."

"What shall we do? After what has happened, it would be decidedly unhealthy to return to town, for our connection with the train-robbery is sure to leak out."

"I, for one, have no desire to return. This cosey island home is good enough for me," declared Duke Derby. "Listen, boys, while I unfold a little scheme."

"Spit it out, pard."

"Well, to be brief, I propose to wipe out the White Phenix and that black imp, the Demon, and take possession of the premises. You see, there's the captain's self-allotted share of the booty—a goodly sum to us poor fellows; and after he is out of the way, we can settle down to a life of ease, reasonably sure that no one will molest our island retreat."

"What will become of the prisoners?"

"As for the men, I'll quickly find a way to give them an effective quietus. I bear no love for either."

"And the girls?"

"One of them, Ruth Sharon, will be my bride—my island queen. As for the other, you may draw lots for her if you choose," said Duke Derby, with a brutal laugh.

The daring plan of the gambler met with ready approbation, and the trio of traitors immediately put their heads together to arrange the details.

"Of course you understand this is to be no child's play," cautioned Duke Derby. "On the contrary, we must play our cards well to insure success. True, we are slightly superior in numbers, but that goes for naught when we consider the men against us. White Phenix is a very devil to fight, while his right bower, the hunchback, possesses the strength and cunning of a dozen ordinary men. I propose to hide in ambush, and assail them as they return, for unless we can take them by surprise, the game is not worth a rush."

As the intended victims might return at any moment, no time was lost in preparing for the struggle. Their revolvers were carefully cleaned, and the cartridges drawn and replaced by fresh ones. Then the trio repaired to the shore, and concealed themselves in a clump of bushes, close to the spot where the White Phenix must land.

The latter's absence was protracted, and the men in ambuscade had ample time to exercise their patience, as the leaden hours wore slowly away.

It was not until the gray light of morning pervaded the gloomy recesses of the swamp, that Duke Derby's listening ears caught the distant splash of oars; and presently the long-

looked-for boat shot into view, propelled by the herculean hunchback.

The White Phenix sat in the stern, his death-face lighted by a complacent smile, serene in possession of the riches so adroitly wrested from Gilbert Garland—a very satisfactory recompense for his night's labor.

A landing was quickly effected, and after securing the boat, the two outlaws walked up the bank together, not a suspicion of the truth entered the mind of the heedless leader.

Crouching low in ambush, tightly grasping ready weapons, the three stern-faced gamblers nervously themselves for the critical moment.

"Steady, now, boys! Everything depends upon the first shot," softly whispered Duke Derby. "Aim at that cursed nigger, both of you! I'll tend to old chalk-face myself!"

Crack!—crack!—crack! Three pistol-shots rung out in swift succession. Three stalwart forms leaped exultantly from their hiding-place.

But alas! for Duke Derby and his well-laid scheme. Even as he pulled trigger, the outlaw chief slipped upon the slimy bank and fell forward; and this slight mishap saved him from the bullet of the assassin.

Quickly recovering, the White Phenix was amazed to see his three subordinates in battle array.

"Treachery!" he cried; and a revolver leaped into either hand.

Meanwhile, Duke Derby's associates were equally unfortunate in their attack upon the Swamp Demon. One shot missed the black altogether; the other lodged in his brawny shoulder. But heeding not the stinging missile, the huge hunchback rushed to the aid of his master, with a snarl like that of an infuriated tiger.

Then followed a rapid fusilade, mingled with the shouts of excited combatants; but the conflict was of brief duration, and resulted in the utter discomfiture of Duke Derby's party.

One of the gamblers fell dead, pierced through the heart by a bullet from the bandit chief's revolver. His companion was seized by the terrible Swamp Demon, dashed to the earth, and speedily choked to death by those long, bony fingers. Duke Derby alone survived.

The arch-plotter, seeing the game was lost, made a reckless dash, and succeeded in reaching the boat just vacated by his foes. He pushed off, seized the oars, and rowed desperately away, while bullets flew thick and fast around him.

The two outlaws hurriedly launched another boat, and dashed swiftly in pursuit. The White Phenix was not satisfied with victory; nothing but the life of the traitor could appease his terrible rage. Crouching in the prow, while the hunchback rowed, he fired shot after shot at the fugitive, but the rocking motion of the craft made his aim uncertain, and Duke Derby kept on.

Fear lent the traitor wondrous power, and he actually held his own against the superior strength of the Swamp Demon. It is difficult to determine the result of the chase had not an accident occurred.

One of the hunchback's oars suddenly snapped in twain. The boat whirled half-way round and instantly capsized, leaving its occupants struggling in the water.

While the baffled outlaws were devoting their energies to righting the overturned craft, Duke Derby rowed triumphantly on and disappeared in the dark depths of the swamp!

CHAPTER XII.

DUKE DERBY'S FATE.

MEANWHILE the four prisoners within the hut were having a very miserable time. Talking was their only solace; but the situation was not conducive to pleasant conversation, so but few words were spoken.

The afternoon following Headlight Harry's recapture wore slowly away. Night fell, and the two young men, completely exhausted, soon dropped into a profound slumber.

In Morpheus's dreamy arms danger and hardships were forgotten and dawning day found them still peacefully sleeping.

They were awakened by a familiar sound—the sharp report of fire-arms. Were friends coming to the rescue? Instantly the captives were on the alert. The fusilade continued for several minutes, then all was still.

Rolling to the wall, Headlight Harry peered through the loop-hole, hoping to learn the cause of the disturbance. Presently he saw the White Phenix approaching, followed by the Swamp Demon, who bore in his arms a quantity of clothing. Nothing could be seen of the

other members of the band. The outlaws proceeded to examine the garments and appropriated the contents of the pockets, after which the clothing was carefully laid aside.

Suspecting the truth at first, Headlight Harry now felt that his suspicions were affirmed, when the hunchback held up a coat of peculiar pattern, which the engineer had seen upon the back of one of the gamblers.

So it was no attempted rescue, after all, but a disagreement between the robbers resulting in a victory for the White Phenix. With feelings of bitter disappointment Headlight Harry imparted the intelligence to his friend.

Once more plunged from the pinnacle of hope to the depths of despair, the captives lapsed into a moody silence, which was only broken when, several hours after, the White Phenix entered the cabin.

For a minute he gloatingly gazed upon the helpless prisoners without speaking. His terrible face bore an expression of malignant hatred.

"Well, dear friends, are you beginning to tire of your situation?" he asked, grinning maliciously. "Do you find it uncomfortable lying there like trussed-up turkeys? Well, cheer up, for I have arranged to give you both a little exercise."

"I meant to attend to you before, but circumstances prevented. Now, however, is a favorable time, and I propose to begin the festivities while the mood is on me. Ho, Demon!"

The black hunchback grinning satanically, quickly appeared in answer to the summons.

"These gentlemen wish to look upon our recent preparations. Conduct them outside!" commanded the outlaw captain; and, accordingly, the prisoners were carried bodily from the hut by the herculean Swamp Demon.

"See!" cried the White Phenix.

He pointed to an adjacent tree, from which a stout limb projected horizontally like a giant arm. Two short ropes, a few feet apart, each ending in a noose, swung suggestively from the bough. On the ground underneath was accumulated a quantity of brushwood, dry grass, and other inflammable material. There was no mistaking the significance of these preparations.

"You see, everything is ready for the entertainment in which you are to act a prominent part," explained the outlaw chief. "The programme is short but highly sensational. First we will hoist the victims, arranging the nooses just tight enough to give you an idea of what is to follow. Then a gentle fire will be kindled, to take the chill off the atmosphere, also to impart more animation to your movements, as you amuse us with a lively dance in mid-air. Finally, after this entertainment has ceased to interest us, a good, strong pull upon the ropes, and the show is over! What think you of the prospect, gentlemen?"

Neither of the prisoners made a response to the taunting speech. While the horrors of the situation fairly curdled their blood, yet they managed to maintain an outward composure that amazed the outlaw.

"Now, I'm not altogether unreasonable," continued the White Phenix. "It would be cruel to tear you away from the joys of this earth on a moment's notice. I'll give you one half-hour to say your prayers, make your wills, and attend to other matters, such, for instance, as saying farewell to your dear lady friends, who doubtless will be loth to let you go. Ha, ha, ha!"

The prisoners were now returned to their quarters. Despair filled their breasts, for there was no hope for mercy from such a fiend as the White Phenix. Only thirty minutes to live! The thought was horrible!

Hark! A faint rap suddenly reached the ears of the captives. It came from the secret passage, the entrance to which had been carefully re-covered after the discovery of Headlight Harry. A moment later came a cautious "hiss!"

Was help at hand? The hearts of the doomed prisoners beat hopefully, as they hastened to answer the signal.

"Hello, Ralph Renwood and Headlight Harry!" called a faint voice from below.

"Hello, yourself!" retorted the engineer.

"Are you alone?"

"Yes."

The flooring was suddenly upheaved, and a tall figure appeared in the opening.

"Shoot me for a cat! It's Duke Derby!" ejaculated Headlight Harry.

It was, indeed, the notorious gambler, but how changed!

Although escaping with his life, Duke Derby had carried away ample evidence of the White

Phenix's marksmanship, and now presented a sorry spectacle.

A ball had plowed a bloody furrow in his cheek; one ear was shot entirely away. His garments were soaked in blood that oozed from a ghastly wound in his side. The once swarthy face of the gambler was now deathly pale, and his eyes burned with a feverish light. It was only with great difficulty that he climbed from the tunnel. The chief's lead had not been wasted, after all, and Duke Derby's hours were numbered.

Without a word, the gambler produced a knife and liberated his former foes, after which a like service was performed for the captive girls.

"What does this mean, Derby?" was eagerly demanded, as the delighted fellows rubbed their bruised and benumbed limbs to restore the circulation. "You are an angel in disguise."

The gambler smiled faintly, as he staggered against the wall for support.

"A queer-looking angel, I reckon," he said. "You see, I tired of the White Phenix's authority, and planned to kill him; but luck was against us, and we lost the game. I, alone, escaped, but the devils left their mark here. Well, it's only what I deserve, for the trick was a dirty one, anyway!"

"But why did you return to assist us?" inquired Ralph Renwood, curiously.

"Well, it happened this way," returned the gambler, speaking with difficulty. "I was rowing up the bayou, after my pursuers swamped their boat, growing weaker every moment from this wound in my side, when a strange voice seemed suddenly to assail my ears.

"'Duke Derby,' it says, 'you have got your billet at last. Before another sun sets, you will shake hands with old Satan. Now, think of those poor devils helpless in the clutches of the White Phenix. Perhaps you can save them if you try. Duke Derby, you have lots of sins to answer for. Try to atone for the past by doing one kind deed before you die!'

"So back I come, prompted by the influence of that mysterious voice. It was rough work, for my strength was failing fast, but I succeeded in skirting the island, and landed near the exit of the underground passage, which the chief had revealed to me. Now I am here, and have done all I can for you."

The prisoners were visibly affected by the touching words of the stricken gambler.

"Your hand, Derby!" exclaimed Ralph Renwood. "This noble action at once wipes out the past. I am glad to call you friend!"

"Yes; put it there, old hoss! You're a trump card, an' no mistake," supplemented Headlight Harry.

Duke Derby's eyes were turned inquiringly toward Ruth Sharon.

"And you—do you, too, forgive me?" he interrogated.

"Yes," answered the fair girl, simply; and she took the shaking hand of the gambler.

"I feel like a new man now. I can take the dread journey with less fear of the hereafter. Hark!" he cried, with sudden energy. "I hear approaching footsteps. Fly to the tunnel! You will find the boat on the shore. Quick! or you are lost!"

"And you?" interrogated Renwood, as the party rushed to the passage.

"I will bring up the rear. Makehaste, if you wish to escape!"

The fugitives hastily lowered themselves into the tunnel, just as the White Phenix appeared at the door.

The half-hour of grace had expired, and the chief had come for his victims; he was scarcely prepared for the sight that met his gaze. With an infuriated cry he leveled a revolver at the head of the gambler, but the movement was entirely unnecessary.

Duke Derby suddenly pitched forward, blood gushed from his mouth and ears, and he fell in a huddled heap, effectually blocking the entrance to the tunnel, his glassy eyes fixed upon the White Phenix in a look of triumph.

Meantime, the four fugitives were hastening through the underground passage, stumbling blindly in the darkness.

"I don't hear any one in pursuit," remarked Headlight Harry. "Can it be old chalk-face has given up the chase?"

"Not he. More likely he is at this moment in his boat, hurrying to intercept our retreat."

They reached the pit, and utilizing the rope-ladder, were soon at the top. Duke Derby's boat could be seen, drawn up on the bank close at hand. The fugitives lost no time in embarking. Each man seized an oar, and the craft shot out into the stream.

At that moment there was a lusty shout, as their dreaded foes darted into view, a considerable distance away.

"Hello! Chalk-face an' his nigger are on deck," cried Headlight Harry. "Now comes the tug-of-war. It's pull Dick, pull devil! Go it for your life, old pard!"

Then commenced a fearful race for life and liberty!

CHAPTER XIII.

OUT OF THE TOILS.

OVER the reeking waters of the dismal swamp, swiftly sped pursuers and pursued. The latter possessed a good lead; but could they maintain this advantage against the herculean powers of the foe?

Both young men were excellent oarsmen, and the blades rose and fell in perfect unison, as, with quick, energetic pulls they urged the craft along. But, fast as they flew, the pursuers came on with equal rapidity.

The grotesque Swamp Demon held the oars, and, despite the fact that a bullet was deeply imbedded in his shoulder, his long, powerful strokes caused the light craft to fairly skim the water.

Had the two young railroad men been the sole occupants of their boat, the White Phenix could have speedily ended the chase by shooting down the weaponless youths, but the presence of the girls deterred him from pulling trigger. He could not afford to risk hitting the maiden whom he felt bound to recapture, and so impatiently awaited the result of the black hunchback's exertions.

The course of the fugitives was happily shaped, for they soon found themselves between the banks of the broad bayou which they knew to be the outlet of the morass. This sluggish stream would conduct them to the railroad, under which it passed. To reach this point the fugitives strained every nerve, at the same time realizing that to accomplish this would afford no shelter, yet hoping against hope that chance would bring some passer-by to the rescue.

The swamp was now left behind, while the shores were higher and fringed by dense thickets. The course of the stream was serpentine, twisting and winding through a vast meadow.

As the boats flew along, it was soon evident that the pursuers were gaining in the chase. The marvelous powers of the Swamp Demon were too much for even the combined efforts of the fugitives.

Foot by foot, the gap between the boats was steadily narrowed. The hunchback worked like a demon. The White Phenix crouched eagerly in the bow, and his pale face wore an expression of fiendish delight, when he beheld the prey almost within their grasp.

Headlight Harry and Ralph Renwood, laboring like heroes, saw in consternation that their mightiest efforts were in vain.

"Our goose is cooked, old pard. Old Nick, himself, couldn't outrun that cursed nigger," panted the former, the perspiration pouring in streams down his honest face.

"Never say die!" returned Ralph, his handsome face set in grim resolve. "When the time comes, use your oar for a club and battle for life!"

Headlight Harry's response was a joyous cry.

"Hooray! We're saved, or I'm a Chinaman!" he yelled.

As the boat followed a sweeping bend of the stream, our friends were suddenly brought into sight of the railroad; and along the track, above a steep embankment, could be seen—oh! welcome sight—a score of laborers busily at work.

Headlight Harry's shout reached the ears of the trackmen, some of whom immediately recognized the occupants of the boat.

Quickly comprehending the situation, they rushed down the embankment in a body. Most of the men were armed, and weapons gleamed conspicuously as they hastened to the scene.

This unexpected intervention threw the pursuing outlaws into confusion. The Swamp Demon hastily backed water, as a storm of bullets flew viciously around the boat. One of the missiles lodged in the arm of the negro, who started up with a roar of pain, dropping the oars, which immediately floated out of reach.

Left without means of propelling the craft, the discomfited swamp-dwellers sought to evade capture by taking to the water. Swimming like beavers, with bullets flying thick and fast, they reached the opposite bank and vanished in the thicket.

Meanwhile the refugees hastened to effect a landing, scarcely able to realize that they were safe at last from the persecutions of the White Phenix. Hardly was this accomplished when the fleeing outlaws were seen to emerge from the timbers, some distance away.

"After them, boys!" commanded the young superintendent. "They are the men who wrecked the Night Express, and there's a price upon their heads."

This information was sufficient to stimulate the trackmen to their best efforts. Ten thousand dollars reward! The thought lent wings to the crowd that rushed pell-mell in pursuit.

The White Phenix and his black shadow sped in the direction of the railroad. A few hundred yards above was a short side-track. Here stood the "construction-train," consisting of an engine and a single car, the latter for the transportation of tools, and accommodation of the "gang" engaged in making repairs along the line. Toward this point the fugitive outlaws made their way, easily keeping well in advance of the pursuers.

With characteristic cunning, the chief saw a possible way out of difficulty. Determined to seize the train, he scrambled desperately up the embankment.

The engineer and fireman were ensconced in a shady nook, close by, deep in the mysteries of seven-up. They heard the shouts of the trackmen, but it was too late to prevent the capture of the engine.

The Swamp Demon quickly opened the switch, while the chief kept on and bounded into the cab. In a moment the train was in motion, the hunchback swinging dexterously aboard, as it rushed out upon the main line.

Hurrying to intercept the fugitives, the trackmen delivered a rattling volley as they flew past, but the occupants of the cab threw themselves upon the floor and escaped unscathed. Several attempted to board the engine, but the only man who succeeded in gaining a foothold received a crushing blow from the black hunchback, and dropped senseless to the ground.

Down the line sped the triumphant outlaws with the stolen train, and a moment later vanished from the view of the baffled pursuers.

Ralph Renwood was exasperated to think that his arch-enemy was still at liberty. So long as the White Phenix was free, the superintendent and his bride must remain in constant fear of his terrible malignity.

At that moment, however, a shrill whistle was heard, and presently a passenger-train tore into view.

"The Mail-train! Ha! We'll have the scoundrel yet," cried Headlight Harry.

The train was signaled, and the party hastened to get aboard. Ralph Renwood climbed into the cab and ordered the engineer to proceed at full speed to Richville, a dozen miles away. Here he intended to cut loose the engine (for another could be procured for the train) and press on after the flying outlaw.

The distance was quickly traversed. Richville presented a lamentable appearance. Half the town was burned, with smoke still rising from the blackened ruins, while the streets teemed with indignant citizens. The arrival of the long-sought-for absents was greeted with cheers from the crowd collected around the station. The girls were borne in triumph to their respective homes.

Hardly a moment was wasted here by the determined man-hunters. Relieved from the burden of the heavy train, their locomotive once more darted away in chase of the White Phenix.

Headlight Harry was at the throttle now, his face beaming with enthusiasm. The engine was a superior one, and under his magic guidance tore over the iron at a terrific pace. Ralph Renwood stood by the engineer's side, while the cab was crowded with well-armed men bent on running the fleeing outlaws to the earth.

CHAPTER XIV.

EXIT WHITE PHENIX.

At this moment the White Phenix and his black satellite were about ten minutes in advance of their pursuers and proceeding at a moderate rate of speed. The fugitive chief exulted in the fact that his enemies were left many miles from the nearest telegraph-point, and, consequently, were powerless to continue the chase, for, in his excitement, he failed to think of the mail-train that, unfortunately for him, followed close behind.

The road ran through a rough, unsettled region, with the nearest stopping-place fully twenty miles beyond. It was the White Phenix

The White Phenix.

mix's purpose to keep on until a favorable point was reached, then abandon the engine and take to the woods.

Little thought he that a relentless foe was at that moment on the trail, rapidly coming nearer and nearer! But the time soon came when the illusion was dispelled, and the White Captain awakened to a true sense of his peril.

The railroad suddenly encountered a broad stretch of marshland, to avoid which a wide detour was made, the track winding back upon the other side and forming a gigantic horseshoe. Half-reclining on the engineer's seat, puffing one of Gilbert Garland's superb cigars, the outlaw glanced carelessly across the water as he whirled around the horseshoe and saw—

A solitary locomotive, rushing like a meteor on his trail, its polished metal work glittering in the sun!

Only a fleeting glimpse of the pursuing engine as it flashed among the trees, but it was enough to rouse the White Phenix from his lethargy. The cigar dropped from his lips unheeded, as he bounded to the throttle and pulled it open to the furthest notch.

"The fellows are close at our heels. How came they here? Oh, yes, I see—the Mail-train! Fool that I was to dally the time away! Stir yourself, Demon, and feed the fire! Pile on the wood! Lively, lively, you black imp!" yelled the outlaw captain, furious with fear.

The train bounded away with increased velocity. But the stolen engine was an old machine, worn out in active service, and now used only occasionally to transport the construction "gang," and other light services. Indeed, it was not considered safe to run her at a very high rate of speed. Under these conditions, there was little hope of outstripping the fleet pursuer, now hardly three miles behind.

The White Phenix knew it; and leaving the engine to care for herself, he bade the hunchback follow him, and bounded over the tender into the car. Snatching up axes, the outlaws went vigorously at work demolishing the interior of the car. A huge pile of combustible material was soon piled upon the floor, and over it was poured the contents of several oil-cans, after which a lighted match was applied.

The fire blazed up brightly, quickly communicating to the roof and sides, and in a moment the entire car was burning fiercely.

White Phenix and the hunchback retreated to the engine. Just ahead, the line crossed a wooden bridge that spanned a tiny stream. It was the cunning bandit's purpose to fire this bridge, hoping to destroy it in time to prevent the passage of his pursuers.

As they approached, he gradually slackened speed, and finally stopped with the burning car resting upon the bridge, which was built with high wooden sides.

The shackle-pin was quickly drawn, and the headlong flight continued. Long absence of rain had rendered the timbers of the bridge dry as tinder, and the White Phenix, looking gleefully back, saw that his labor would not be in vain.

Three minutes later, sweeping swiftly around a curve, the man-hunters were electrified to find an unexpected obstacle across their path, in the shape of the bridge, now burning with irresistible fury.

The car was totally consumed; only the trucks and wheels remained upon the rails. The sides of the bridge, together with the sleepers, were a seething mass of flame.

Straight toward the burning bridge the engine sped with the speed of the wind. Standing firmly at his post, Headlight Harry made no effort to check his machine. To stop meant the escape of the outlaws; to keep on was, perhaps—death! But the resolute trailers were inclined to risk the latter, and so the locomotive rushed on.

Would they succeed in running the fiery gantlet? Would not the blazing timbers give way beneath the ponderous weight of the engine?

Every man held his breath, as they flashed into the terrible whirlpool of fire.

Crash! The obstructing trucks were lifted from the track and hurled down the embankment. The engine quivered from the shock, but gallantly kept the irons. In a twinkling the perilous spot was crossed. Just in time; for even as the wheels of the tender flashed upon the solid track, there was a mighty crash of falling timbers, and the entire mass sank suddenly into the stream, leaving a great yawning chasm where the bridge had been.

Thankful for their providential escape, the man-hunters sped onward, eager to overtake their prey. Soon entering a long, straight

stretch of track, the fugitives could be seen but half a mile away.

The White Phenix, furious at the failure of his trick, was seen wildly gesticulating to the hunchback, who steadily fed the fire, looking a very fiend in the light reflected from the seething, roaring furnace.

"How they punish the fuel!" gasped Headlight Harry. "The old 'Veteran' hasn't taken such exercise before for many years. I wonder she stands it so well. Well, gents, get your shooters ready, for in five minutes the game—Hello!"

There came a thunderous report, and the outlaw hunters were horrified to see the stolen engine lifted bodily into the air, shattered into a thousand fragments, which flew in every direction.

"Great Heaven! The overcharged boiler has bursted! The White Phenix has worked his own destruction!" cried Ralph Renwood, excitedly.

In a minute the party arrived at the scene of destruction.

Fragments of the shattered locomotive strewed the ground on every hand. Nothing could be seen at first of the doomed outlaws, but—

"Look!" suddenly cried Headlight Harry, his face wearing a look of horror as he pointed into a tree some distance from the spot.

Lodged among the topmost branches, two heads—one white, one black—dripping with blood and doubly repulsive in death, glared hideously down upon the startled group—all that remained recognizable of the terrible White Phenix and the black Swamp Demon!

In speechless awe the trailers gazed upon the frightful spectacle.

"So our trail is unexpectedly ended," at length remarked the superintendent. "Death has cheated us of our prey! It is the work of Providence!"

"Yes; and a mighty good job, too. Saved the hangman some nasty work," rejoined Headlight Harry. "Well, old pard, our arch-enemy is silenced at last. No possibility of resurrecting yonder death's head into another White Phenix!"

There is but little to add.

The fact that what threatened to be a formidable league of train-robbers had been thus effectually squelched in its infancy gave rise to universal rejoicing, and our friends were warmly congratulated for their instrumentality in bringing about this desirable state of affairs.

A visit was paid to the dismal haunts of the Swamp Demon. All traces of the bandit stronghold were destroyed, and the gloomy region left to the undisputed denizenship of birds and reptiles.

Richville was not seriously crippled by the incendiary fire. New and handsome buildings sprung, Phenix-like, from the ashes, and the town continued on its way to wealth and prosperity.

Headlight Harry went back to his beloved engine. Always gay and free, yet his merry face grows even brighter, when, daily guiding his iron steed past Seth Sharon's cottage, he sees fair Ruth waving welcome from the window. He is eagerly looking forward to the no distant day when he will take the flagman's daughter to a cosey home of their own.

And now we leave them; but as Headlight Harry's life is fraught with danger and excitement, it is possible that he may be heard from again.

THE END.

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Leatherlung's Con and Guilty, of Course,
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The "Free and Equal" Animile Statistix, [For,
Humbug, [tions,
Scipio Scroggs's Ques- Some Things Accounted
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Declamation, Astronomical Corusca-
Shtichen Oats Dot's Wild, The Poet Bold,
Treadwater Jim, January Jones Defends
A Leadville Sermon on the Eagle,
the 'Prod,' The Mule, [Llars,
Address to the Giantess, Brother Gardner on
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Watermelons, The Mosquito Adjured,
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